

Voices for Change for Connecticut's Children Promoting Parent Leadership and Civic Literacy

Executive Summary

Improving Life for Children Through Civic Engagement

Children represent the country's most valuable asset. Poor child outcomes create burdens for children and families, as well as for systems of health, learning and safety. They reduce the quality of life for the children, their families and communities; and, they cost money for communities, states and the federal government. Alternatively, strengthening families and creating resilient communities can result in positive youth development. Because of their dependence on parents to speak and act for them, children need parents who can influence program and policy decisions that will promote positive development and transition to adulthood.

Parents represent a significant resource for policy-makers. By teaching and engaging parents to lead for children – theirs and others – we can strengthen learning, health, and safety for children. Strong families generate strong communities. Reciprocally, when a community is strong, so will its youth be.

Despite their concerns and desire to be involved, parents are not routinely engaged in policy and program development at the community, state or national level; nor are they always getting necessary information that they need to be most effective. Many organizations do not actually know how to engage parents initially or how to keep them engaged in an on-going manner. Few efforts exist to mobilize the potential resources embodied in parents and others responsible for children. The Connecticut Commission on Children developed the *Parent Leadership Training Initiative* to fill this gap and train parents to be agents of change for children through civic engagement.

What is the Parent Leadership Training Initiative?

The Parent Leadership Training Initiative (PLTI) is a state-driven public-private partnership that works with local communities to provide parents with the knowledge, skills and tools of civic engagement. The goals of the PLTI are to effect positive youth development by:

- Helping parents become leaders in their communities through civic engagement;
- Expanding and facilitating the capacity of parents to be change agents for children on a neighborhood, regional and state level;
- Developing supportive communities of parents within regions of the state;
- Facilitating parental involvement in state and local policy and decision-making processes; and
- Increasing parent-child interactions and the quality of children's programs through parental involvement.

At the state level, the Connecticut Commission on Children provides: (1) a copyright curriculum; (2) a process for implementing the training; (3) teacher training; (4) technical assistance; (5) statewide coordination of local partners through a monthly meeting of PLTI team representatives and on-going communications; (6) a state-wide graduation at the conclusion of the training; (7) a longitudinal process and outcomes evaluation; and (8) state-wide quality assurance through the project director and state staff.

The program is implemented in each site through a local organization that partners with the Commission. Within each site there is a Design Team that has responsibility for: (1) conducting outreach and informing the public about the PLTI; (2) introducing the leadership training opportunities to participants; (3) recruiting, interviewing and selecting individuals to attend the training; (4) ensuring that the courses run smoothly; and (5) securing the necessary funding to conduct the PLTI in its community.¹ Design Teams also engage in strategic planning for the PLTI and often develop activities for PLTI alumni as appropriate in each site.

Once recruited, participants attend a 20-week curriculum that integrates personal and child development, leadership training, civic literacy, and civic participation skills. The curriculum encompasses four components: an initial retreat; two 10-week sessions that focus on knowledge about the change process, skill-building, and tools of civic engagement; and a community project. The PLTI has been operational since 1993 and is currently offered in 10 sites around the state. To date, approximately 800 individuals have successfully completed the training.

Evaluation Goals and Methods

In the summer of 2002, the Connecticut Commission on Children contracted with University of New Hampshire to conduct a statewide comprehensive evaluation of the PLTI. The purpose of the evaluation was to better understand and document the effects of PLTI on participants, families, children and communities, and to develop a “living” database that could be used for future evaluations. Project activities included conducting focus groups; conducting a comprehensive participant survey; conducting key-informant interviews with participants and community leaders; assessing participants’ community projects; and developing a database and protocol for future use.

The core of this report is built around the participant survey. From a mailing list of 742 names covering 1993-2002, 583 surveys were successfully disseminated from local teams, accounting for 78% of the target population. 123 surveys were returned for non-delivery and 36 surveys from 1993-94 were eliminated because of bias. Sixty-eight percent of respondents were graduates from 2000-2002. We received 191 completed surveys, covering the program from 1995-2002, giving a 33% response rate. Additional mailings and follow-up calls were conducted by local Design Teams. Although the data are quite consistent and reflect a broad diversity within the participant population, as a result of this level of response, we allow for possible respondent biases and suggest caution when interpreting the results.

¹ Costs are moderate and vary depending upon how the site implements various program components. For example, a site may have a free use of space or it may have to pay rent. Dinner may be delivered using a potluck system, or it may be catered. Childcare may be donated or not.

Key Findings from the Participant Survey, Focus Groups and Interviews

According to focus group participants (Appendix 1) and survey respondents (Appendix 2), the PLTI is a highly successful initiative for generating parent leaders and promoting sustained civic engagement in communities and at the state level.

PLTI appeals to and recruits a rich diversity of individuals who differ along race and ethnicity, class, education and socioeconomic status (Chapter II):

- About 40% of all participants were white and 60% represented African-American, Hispanic and other races, creating a wide spectrum of racial diversity in the population;
- Participants' annual household income was well distributed across all levels: 37% had annual household incomes between \$40,000-\$84,999, while 44% had incomes below \$20,000 and 19% had incomes \$85,000 and higher;
- Over half (54%) of all participants had some college; 17% had vocational training and 20% had post-graduate training, indicating a broad range of educational attainment;
- The large majority of participants were women (89%), and most (68%) were married. Two-thirds (66%) had 2 or more children living at home, while 13% had no children living at home; and
- Differences of these characteristics among sites reflect general the socioeconomic characteristics and geo-demographic patterns in the state's population. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as race, education and income, are inter-related.

Recruitment is conducted through a variety of mechanisms; however, over half of the survey respondents (54%) heard about PLTI through word of mouth. While the time commitment is substantial, barriers to participating are limited. The PLTI makes childcare and transportation available to participants who require it. Most participants (65%) enrolled because they wanted to get involved in their communities or they wanted to learn effective skills for dealing with issues in their community and children's schools.

The PLTI is a learning environment that increases cross-cultural understanding and tolerance for diversity. Tolerance for diversity and the ability to listen and interface with people and perspectives different from one's own are a fundamental and necessary characteristic for a successful democracy. Many participants reported that the PLTI experience enhanced their ability to work with people who are different than them, and increased their tolerance for that diversity. Respondents also mentioned that PLTI improved their ability to listen without judging to other points of view.

The PLTI gives participants the knowledge, skills, and tools of civic engagement to be leaders and change agents in their communities, be it for a specific issue with a child's school, a neighborhood crime issue, or more general issues related to budget cuts in state or local government sponsored programs (Chapter III). Within an ecological framework that addresses actions and outcomes at the individual, family, community and institutional levels, we developed

a set of process and outcomes measure adapted from Rappaport² to assess civic engagement. These measures include: (1) increased knowledge and interest in civic affairs; (2) increased skills and use of tools of civic engagement (such as advocacy, negotiation and conflict resolution skills, policy analysis, evaluation and benchmarking, ability to obtain information about an issue); (3) increased participation (such as voting behavior, participation on community boards or activities, working with professionals in the community, communicating with public officials, providing testimony at public hearings), and (4) empowerment (increased confidence, belief in ability to be a change agent. We also used a Civic Literacy Scale developed by a similar program in Ohio. Because this was a retrospective evaluation, we did not have measures of the change in knowledge, attitudes or behaviors. This will be addressed in future evaluations by having a pre- and post-training assessment (Appendix 4).

Over time and across all sites, PLTI graduates have increased their knowledge, use of civic skills and their involvement in their communities. Over half the respondents (55%) said that the PLTI exceeded their expectations. Another 41% said PLTI met their expectations. Respondents also reported that they learned a good amount (40%) or an exceptional (30%) amount from the training. In addition, PLTI graduates reported using the following civic skills they learned at PLTI at least once a month or more:

- The large majority of survey respondents reported working with people different than themselves (93%) or working with children other than their own (80%);
- Most respondents reported being engaged in advocacy work (73%) or conflict resolution activities (67%);
- Almost 3 out of 5 PLTI graduates are engaged in public speaking (58%).
- More than half reported participating on community boards (52%) or working with budgets (51%), reflecting increased parent involvement in decision-making;
- Over half of the respondents are participating in community organizing activities (52%) and/or coalition building activities (51%); and
- 66% of the respondents indicated that they are using skills they learned from PLTI in a job outside the home.
- 84% of participants voted before the training. However, 9% became new voters as a result of taking the training.

Participants' scores on the Civic Literacy Scale were high after the training. The Civic Literacy Scale is a 14-question set that addresses various aspects of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors with respect to civic participation and is rated on a 5-point Likert Scale, with 5 being the top score. Sixty percent of survey respondents had composite average scores of 4 (47%) or 5 (13%) after the training.³

Participants found the program to be empowering and transformational. In addition to the new skills they acquired, the majority of participants spoke of the increased confidence, life-long friendships and support networks they made through PLTI.

²Modified from Miles S. Rappaport, Report on the state of Democracy in Connecticut, 1998.

³ Scores of 4 and 5 reflect a combination of skills and beliefs about empowerment. A score of 4 means that respondents thought the statement was "mostly true." A score of 5 means they thought the statement was "very true."

- The majority of respondents had only positive things to say about the PLTI, saying it was “*inspiring*,” “*a great learning experience*,” or “*fulfilling*,” and talking about how they “*discovered the leadership*” in themselves through the training.
- 82% of survey respondents said the PLTI improved their ability to be an agent of change in their community;
- 81% reported that they feel they can have a part in improving their communities;
- 79% reported that PLTI improved their self-confidence;
- 70% felt confident in their ability to help their community grow;
- 70% reported being able to work with agencies and professionals within their community; and
- 69% said they were able to get information to help them better understand issues in their communities.

Almost half (45%) said PLTI created new opportunities for them that they did not know existed. One in 5 participants (20%) returned to school for additional or advanced education; 15% got new jobs; 11% developed new careers; and 8% received raises at their current place of employment.

Program outcomes were similar across dissimilar groups, regardless of demographic (age, race, marital status, number and ages of children), geographic (PLTI site) or socioeconomic (education, household income) characteristics. This suggests that (1) the PLTI has been implemented consistently across sites and over time; (2) the curriculum is effective; and/or (3) all participants benefited from the training regardless of who they were or where they were in their lives when they began this journey.

Child Outcomes: The goal of the PLTI is to empower parents to improve the lives of their children through civic engagement. While improved child outcomes are not the immediate focus of the PLTI, we found that the training did in fact have direct benefits for children. Almost four of five participants (79%) said their children had showed some positive change as a result of their participation in the PLTI.

- 47% reported that their children are now participating in community activities;
- 41% showed improvements in their self-confidence;
- 31% began to take more interest in the news;

Other reported changes included: more respect for parents (27%); greater ability to resist peer pressure for risky behaviors (25%); more reading (24%); better grades (23%); increased interest in local politics (21%); better school attendance (16%); less TV watching (14%);⁴ and improved health (12%). About one in three participants(34%) reported that their children exhibited changes in 4 or more of the 11 categories. A small minority (8%) reported changes in 8 or more of the categories. These changes may represent a substantial shift for the children experiencing the changes. Additional research in this area is warranted.

Family Outcomes: Survey respondents were asked to assess changes in their families in 8 areas: 42% reported at least 1 or 2 areas in which their families experienced positive change;

⁴ Robert Putnam makes a strong argument for the impact of TV watching on civic disengagement in his article, “The strange disappearance of civic America,” *The American Prospect* 7:24, December 1,1996.

23% reported changes in 3-5 areas; and a small group (11%) reported changes in 6-8 of the areas as a result of participating in the PLTI. Specifically:

- 40% felt more connected to other families;
- 39% reported improved communications within their family;
- 36% reported greater ability to resolve problems;
- 29% reported that the family spent more time together;
- About the same (28%) said they were enjoying each other more;
- 15% said their relationships improved relationships;
- 15% indicated that household chores are done more easily; and
- 12% reported improved financial situation.

Almost one in three respondents (28%) said they created supportive relationships as a result of PLTI, and 8% said they left relationships that were not supportive.

Community Outcomes: Comments from the survey consistently speak to the impact of the PLTI on participants' ability to get involved and make a difference in their community. Representative comments are: "*Because of PLTI, I am active in my community meetings and I know my rights.*" And "*Since graduating from PLTI I have become considerably more involved with the school system and in other areas of my community: I chair the PLTI alumni; I interview future PLTI candidates on the design team; I do public speaking for PLTI; I am the PTO city-wide rep for my child's school; I work on community projects; I am met and work with many people; I am happier and involved.* Ultimately, what parents do in their communities is an important measure of success for the PLTI. Creating even one change (24%) in a community can have wide ranging effects. Twenty-nine percent reported three or more changes. In addition:

- 39% of respondents – about 2 in 5 – reported that new coalitions were formed in their communities as a result of PLTI;
- 27% reported that after-school programs were expanded;
- 21% said community services have improved and school policies have changed for the better;
- Participants reported that their neighborhoods (18%) and schools (17%) are now safer as a result of PLTI-related activities;
- Local programs were retained (15%); and
- Alcohol and drug sales were reduced (10%).

Participants also reported that community awareness was raised for a variety of issues, including school budgets, after-school programs, homeless or abandoned adolescents; and early childhood education; drugs and gangs; bullying; housing issues; the need for parental involvement and parents being able to be agents of change.

Training Curriculum: Most respondents thought the curriculum and the facilitators were excellent. A large majority (80%) said the first 10 weeks was "Excellent" (49%) or "Good" (31%). Similarly, 50% said the second session was "Excellent" and 32% said it was "Good." Most aspects of the quality of instruction were also rated as "Excellent" by 50% of more of the respondents for each of the 10-week sessions. Significant differences were noted for site, hours employed per week, and income. Interestingly, education was not a significant factor. The data suggest that the quality of individual facilitator and his/her knowledge of local issues and people were important factors. Most respondents indicated that facilitators knew their subjects, they

were accessible to the participants, they were very helpful, and in general, participants felt very supported through the training.

Some participants suggested that the time frame was too long and required too much time away from the family. Others felt that the transition between the first and second sessions needed more continuity and suggested that perhaps the facilitators from the second session might attend one or more of the classes in the first session. Other suggestions for improving the curriculum included:

- Having more local guest speakers from government, community agencies;
- Inviting PLTI graduates to speak and involving alumni, particularly with the community projects;
- Providing more field trips and more “hands-on” training
- Teaching computer skills and making computer facilities available;
- Improving the quality and quantity of the handouts;
- Creating a student handbook that participants could take away with them;
- Establishing clear expectations for each participant;
- Making sure the topics are tailored to the local community and that the information is up to date; and
- Providing continuing education credit for the training, perhaps affiliating the PLTI with a university.

Analysis of PLTI Participants’ Community Projects

The community project component of the training is considered very important to assist participants put into to practice what they are learning in the training. It helps them solidify their confidence, skills and knowledge; it is geared towards real life problems that have meaning to the participant; and it gives them an opportunity to get to know and interact with their public officials. This component of the evaluation sought to identify the focus of the projects and what knowledge and skills were used; determine if they were directed to improving the well-being of children; and determine what PLTI goals were met through the projects. A convenience sample included all PLTI sites for the years 1999, 2000 and 2001. Data from 333 individual projects covering 14 communities were analyzed in a two-step process using content analysis (Chapter V).

Participants’ community projects focused on a wide variety of children’s issues as well as general problems and concerns existing within their communities and at the state level. Learning projects accounted for 40% of the projects. Health-related projects accounted for about 1 in 5 participants (19%); and 13% conducted project related to safety issues. The remaining 28% of the projects were focused on the decision-making process, community development or capacity building. Although the projects were assigned to only one category, many had more than one focus.

Many of the projects had significant policy or policy related components and most required engaging community, private or public sector decision makers to bring about the desired change. Similarly, there were a number of projects focused on building community capacity through private and public sector initiatives involving coalitions of community decision makers

such as churches, voluntary organization and government officials.

The majority of the projects suggest that key learning took place and that the participants were able to apply the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom setting to their community projects, including assessment of problems, issues and concerns in participant's communities that were amenable to intervention, sensitivity to cultural needs, problem identification and assessment, skills needed to build coalitions and develop partnerships among various community or state members.

Respondent's comments indicated a need for more supervision and involvement of the facilitators in this aspect of the training. Moreover, of all aspects of the training, participants were most critical of the community projects and had many comments and suggestions for improving the process. For example, many said the goals and process by which the community projects were to be accomplished were not clarified at the beginning of the training; expectations were not clear. As a result, many participants felt pressured during the second 10-week session to pull their projects together. Engaging participants early on, continually reinforcing discussions about the projects, and allowing participants to work together on projects were common suggestions. Participants also wanted more evaluation and feedback on their projects.

Analysis of these community projects demonstrates that the PLTI goals were met and that parents can play a major role in producing positive health, safety and learning outcomes for all children. Through their projects, participants have:

- Become leaders for children and families;
- Developed the capacity to serve as change agents;
- Developed on-going communities of parents for support and action;
- Directly facilitated systems change involving parents in policies and process decisions; and
- Increased parent child interactions to improve child outcomes.

Community Leader Perspective on PLTI

State and community leaders in both the public and private sectors are involved with PLTI participants and are likely to have unique perspectives about the program and its impact on the community and state. In addition, these leaders are likely to have valuable insights into the PLTI's potential for improving the well-being of children. To obtain a broader perspective of the impact of PLTI on local and state policy and programs serving children, in-depth in-person interviews were conducted with community leaders in four communities – Bridgeport, Danbury, Meriden and Stamford – cities that represent the diversity of the state's population. The interviews focused on 4 areas: (1) parents as leaders and agents of change for children; (2) institutional change: the effect of PLTI on programs, policies, and laws affecting children; (3) improving outcomes for children; and (4) next steps for PLTI in the community (Chapter IV).

Based on these key-informant interviews, it is clear that both public and private sector leaders support PLTI financially and philosophically. PLTI is well known and respected in all four communities. It is considered an integral part of each community and considered a major force in increasing civic participation at the local and state level. All informants reported greater

parent visibility and participation as a result of PLTI at meetings, hearings, rallies and in volunteer work in the community.

Community leaders observed that PLTI-trained parent leaders are different from other parent leaders because they know who to go to and where to go to get things done. They have learned to ask questions and find solutions. As a result of their involvement, they are developing a reputation for activism and are known to leaders in the community. Informants also mentioned the exemplary public speaking skills and self-confidence of those participating in the program. One informant stated that the graduates were “intelligent and futuristic in their thinking with the ability to work within the system and not let the system answer for them.”

Another important aspect of their work in the community is that PLTI graduates are active in recruiting other parents to be involved in community activities. This has resulted producing a new constituency of parent leaders in the four communities. Informants reported that parent leaders have learned how to approach school and government leaders and communicate about their children’s needs. The result is that children’s needs are being better met than in the past. One respondent commented that although parents may have the right values, it is the leadership they learn in PLTI that makes them more effective.

Several informants perceived that the diversity of the PLTI classes was instrumental in affecting individual and group tolerance of differences in others. Consequently, the presence of the PLTI program contributed to social and economic equality especially for minority groups in the community.

A number of new activities, policies and laws were attributed to the efforts of PLTI graduates in each community. Some examples include:

- Recreational programs to promote exercise and safe after-school activities, including a skate board park. “Beat the Streets” a boxing program for youth; and a playground for children;
- Programs and activities related to learning, including a school breakfast program; a bullying prevention/remediation program; a police presence in the middle and high schools; and development of an early childhood program;
- Programs and activities related to safety, such as neighborhood watch programs; violence prevention programs, bussing, school cross-walk, and other school safety interventions;
- Programs and activities related to health, including substance abuse prevention programs, a parent education program on childhood attention deficit disorder, making anger management classes available to children in schools, and the effect of pollutants on children’s health;
- Providing testimony in local and state hearings; and
- Participation on Boards of Education, City Councils and other governing boards for public and community-based organizations.

Some informants also concurred that the quality, supply or funding of children’s programs may not have improved in the past couple years, due to the recession and the huge state budget deficit. However, the situation would have been more difficult without the intervention of

PLTI graduates, who pursued funding for after-school projects that otherwise would have been cut. They made an impassioned case for supporting city schools during a difficult budget year where the state faced a \$2 billion deficit (FY 2003-2004). They were able to speak effectively and authoritatively because they were well trained through PLTI. Graduates of the program have also traveled to and spoken in Washington.

Community leaders also provided a number of suggestions based on their knowledge and perception of the PLTI graduate's involvement. Several informants mentioned that they would like to see more involvement by PLTI graduates in politics and non-profit agencies. One leader suggested offering internships as an alternative to or in addition to the community projects. In addition, most community leaders support the idea of conducting PLTI on a larger scale in the state and nation and suggested that their communities could serve as role models.

Several informants reported that PLTI was not clearly distinguished independently of the sponsoring organization. All community leaders believed the PLTI should be promoted and that everyone in the community should know about it. They also suggested that additional reports and surveys need would be useful to identify outcomes, so that everyone is aware of just how much parental involvement is taking place. It's not enough just to run activities; the outcomes of the activities also have to be measured.

Leaders consistently identified the need for expanding parenting skills that result from PLTI participation, stating that PLTI participants could be role models and mentors for younger parents in the community. All believed that PLTI growth was needed to enhance the effectiveness and integration of parents at the local and state level to work on behalf of children and children's issues, and that maintaining and continuing the program was critical to the community's present and future strength and quality of life. They encouraged PLTI to stay focused on children, target more people in the community and continue the high level of leadership for civic participation and democracy.

Overall, the interviews reflected high levels of knowledge, interest in and enthusiasm for the PLTI and its graduates. All key-informants spoke to the actual and potential changes in individuals and the community that were directly linked to the PLTI. Changes at the individual, family and community level were both short and long-term, with the processes learned having the potential to influence the lives of children and parents directly. There was much praise and few if any negative comments. Without exception, they supported the need to continue and expand the program as critical for improving child outcomes and thus, enhancing the community and state's well-being.

Conclusions

Data from this evaluation overwhelmingly supports the notion that PLTI is meeting its goals. It demonstrates that when given civic and leadership tools, parents can guide public policy and decision making directly and indirectly through their actions and commitment to children. Information from survey respondents, focus group participants, in-depth interviews with participants, members of the Design Teams, and community leaders all spoke to the success of PLTI as an effective mechanism for making this engagement a reality. In addition, parents

represent a tremendous human resource for helping communities, states and the nation to mobilize resources to address problems associated with child health, safety and early child care and education.

The PLTI reflects a vision for the future -- a vision that sees all parents, indeed, all people participating in some fashion to make their communities healthier, cleaner, safer, and better learning environments for their children, and that creates support, person to person, family to family, for these activities.

Michele R. Salloway. Ph.D.
University of New Hampshire – April, 2004