

# PARENT LEADERSHIP IN HOME VISITING **KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW REPORT**

Understanding the History, Current State, and Future  
Goals of Michigan's Parent Leadership System



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# BACKGROUND

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Michigan has a rich history of engaging and supporting parent leaders in early childhood systems.<sup>1</sup> For example, parent voice has been formalized within the home visiting system through Local Leadership Groups (LLGs), which bring together local home visiting partners, including organizational partners focused on early childhood and parents, to engage in collaborative system building. Another example of systems building to incorporate parent voice in Michigan is the Parent Leadership in State Government (PLISG) Initiative, which focuses on training new parent leaders on using their voice to impact systems.



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<sup>1</sup> 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.

# NEED FOR EVALUATION

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The impact of parent leadership on both home visiting systems and parent leaders has been reported anecdotally, but systematic studies of the process of developing a parent leadership system and the impact of creating that system are limited. State leaders in home visiting and parent leadership initiated this study based on their interest in understanding how Michigan's parent leadership system was developed, what the implementation of that system looked like, and what systems impacts the parent leadership system has had. Additionally, state leaders wanted to understand areas for continued improvement in the parent leadership system.

The main objective of the study was to learn about the development, implementation, and systems impact of Michigan's parent leadership system. The following research questions were addressed:



**How was Michigan's parent leadership system developed and who and what was involved in that development?**



**In what ways did Michigan's parent leadership system develop from the state and local levels?**



**What was the experience of implementing a system of parent leadership in Michigan like and what impacted implementation?**



**How have parent leaders impacted Michigan's early childhood service systems?**

Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) staff led the research project. The research team would like to acknowledge that the parent leadership system is a small world within the state and its partners, including MPHI staff. For example, several individuals who helped inform the list of possible key informants were key informants themselves. Efforts were made to create distance between individuals with pre-existing relationships whenever possible, including using a single interviewer who was not a member of the core design team and only using staff and partners who were not key informants to review this report.

# METHODS

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All materials and processes for the study were reviewed and approved as a research project prior to implementation by the MPHI Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## PROCEDURE

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An initial list of 23 key informants was created by project staff and stakeholders. The list included both individuals who had been intimately involved in the parent leadership system in Michigan and have deep institutional knowledge of the creation of the system, and individuals who are currently in roles related to parent leadership in Michigan. These individuals hold roles within agencies and organizations at both the state and local levels. Two aligned versions of a semi-structured interview protocol were developed based on whether a participant was a state or local leader to allow for the inclusion of questions that would be unique to the participant's role. Key informants were contacted via email to ask for their interest in participating. Interested individuals completed an electronic consent form and were then contacted by project staff to schedule an approximately 60-minute interview.

## PARTICIPANTS

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Eleven key informants were interviewed for this project. At the time of their interview, eight worked at the state level and three worked at the local level. They represented many agencies and organizations including representatives from home visiting, funders, state government, and non-profits. Since many key informants are in unique positions within the state, a more detailed break-down is not provided to protect their confidentiality. It is important to note that many key informants held other roles within the parent leadership or early childhood system that informed their experiences. For example, some key informants were parent leaders before taking on professional roles within local or state agencies. Some participants had experience at both the local and state levels.

# DATA ANALYSIS

Key informant sessions were professionally transcribed for thematic analysis using NVivo software.<sup>2</sup> A coding team of four evaluators from MPHI used the following approach for thematic analysis.

## Developed and Refined Coding Scheme

Codes were developed using an inductive (bottom-up) approach driven by both the questions in the interview script and parent leaders' responses. An exception to this was a series of codes that were inspired by FSG's Systems Change model to understand systemic impacts with codes including three levels of systems impact: structural, relational, and transformative.<sup>3</sup> Codes were developed under the following categories, and are designated as to whether they pertained to both state and local leaders, state leaders only, or local leaders only:

*Exhibit 1. Overview of topics addressed in key informant interview protocols*

Topic	State Leaders	Local Leaders
<b>Role</b> in Early Childhood System	✓	✓
<b>Goals</b> of Parent Leadership	✓	✓
<b>Observing and Learning</b> from Other Parts of System	✓	✓
<b>Systems Changes Needed</b> to Incorporate Parent Voice	✓	✓
<b>Development</b> of Parent Leadership System	✓	
<b>Collaboration</b> with other Parent Leadership Initiatives	✓	
How Parent Leaders are <b>Identified</b>		✓
<b>Power Dynamics</b> as Clients Transform into Parent Leaders		✓

<sup>2</sup> Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

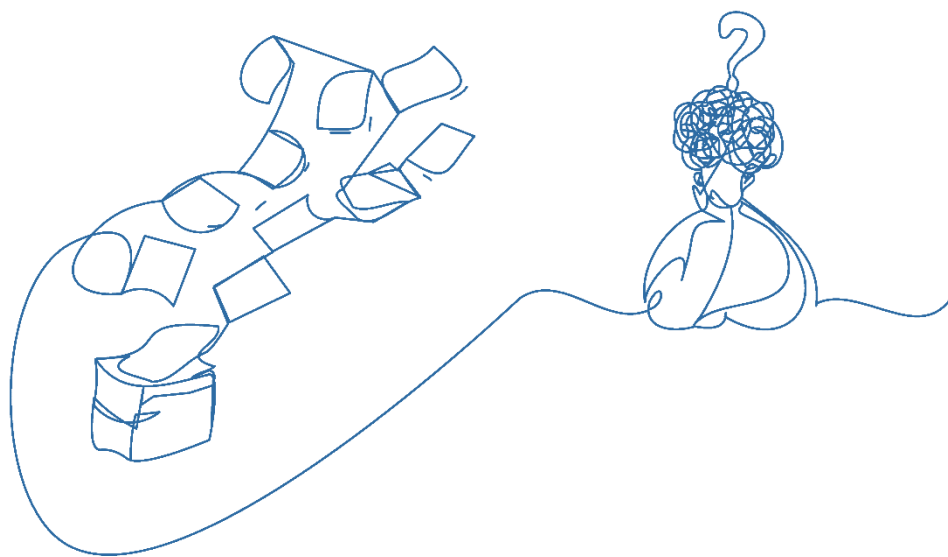
<sup>3</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change. [https://www.fsg.org/resource/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change/](https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/)

**Reached Agreement.** All coders coded two conversations in their own copy of the NVivo master file. Individual codes were merged and queried for inter-coder agreement. The team reviewed the coding comparison query results together and discussed any codes with less than 80% agreement. The team discussed disagreements, adjusted code definitions, and refined the coding scheme if needed.

**Team Qualitative Coding.** Each conversation was coded by two team members. Once all coding was completed, all team members' files were merged and queried for inter-coder agreement. For codes with less than 80% agreement, a team of two coders was assigned to review disagreements within each conversation. That team made a final judgment and resolved the disagreement.

**Thematic Analysis.** Team members identified main ideas within and across each code. Identified themes were initially developed within each major coding category. Themes were also identified as being discussed by both state and local leaders, state leaders only, and local leaders only. Finally, the team reviewed the list of themes to formulate the major findings for presentation in the results section. Often, these major findings linked multiple themes across coding categories into a broader idea.

**Fact Checking.** Several of the interview questions asked key informants to recall historical events in the context of parent leadership in Michigan. When creating summaries and figures to present these results, the research team verified dates and details such as names with either independent documentation (e.g., on an agency website) or with stakeholders familiar with the events.



# RESULTS

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## Key Informants were involved in different ways in Michigan's home visiting, early childhood, and parent leadership systems.

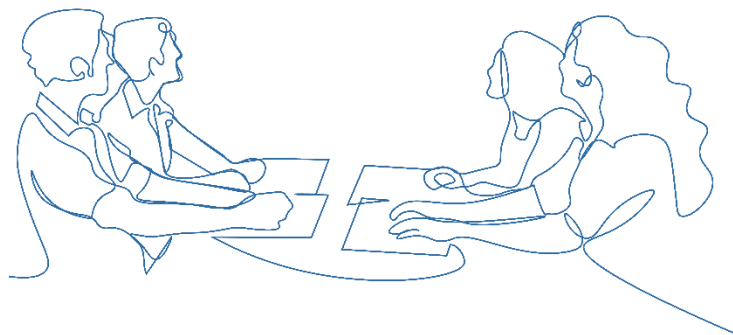
Key informants in this study represented many agencies who were actively engaged in supporting parent leadership work in the state. Agencies included state departments, home visiting programs, funders, non-profit agencies, and local collaboratives. Key informants had many roles within these agencies including administrators, grant writers, coordinators, coaches, facilitators, and community liaisons.

Both state and local key informants were asked when they understood parents have a role in improving home visiting and early childhood systems. Many described how their personal experiences as a parent receiving services to support their own child led them to parent leadership work. Key informants at both state and local levels who were parents of a child with special healthcare needs described the challenges they had navigating early childhood systems and services and wanted to improve the experience for other families. Other key informants who had a history of advocacy for their own children had experiences across multiple systems—some that worked well and others that did not—and wanted to help struggling systems learn from those that worked well for families.



*And so that was kind of the root of my involvement was wanting other families to have a good experience, sometimes a better experience because I had experienced myself how good it could be. And that kind of is the foundation that led to some of this and, you know, a life of working in the early childhood system (laughs), and believing in parent leadership, and believing the value of that lived experience and that voice coming forward.*

-State Key Informant





Some key informants at both the local and state levels came to this understanding through their work in the system, often in prior roles when they had more direct interactions with families receiving early childhood services.



*I was a home visitor back in the day... And you come in with your objective, and agenda, and paperwork to fill out. And really you've got to have those—it didn't take me long to realize that parents should be leading this work, and that they have needs, and that they vary, and that sometimes what I have on my to-do or agenda isn't always what the needs of that family is at the time.*

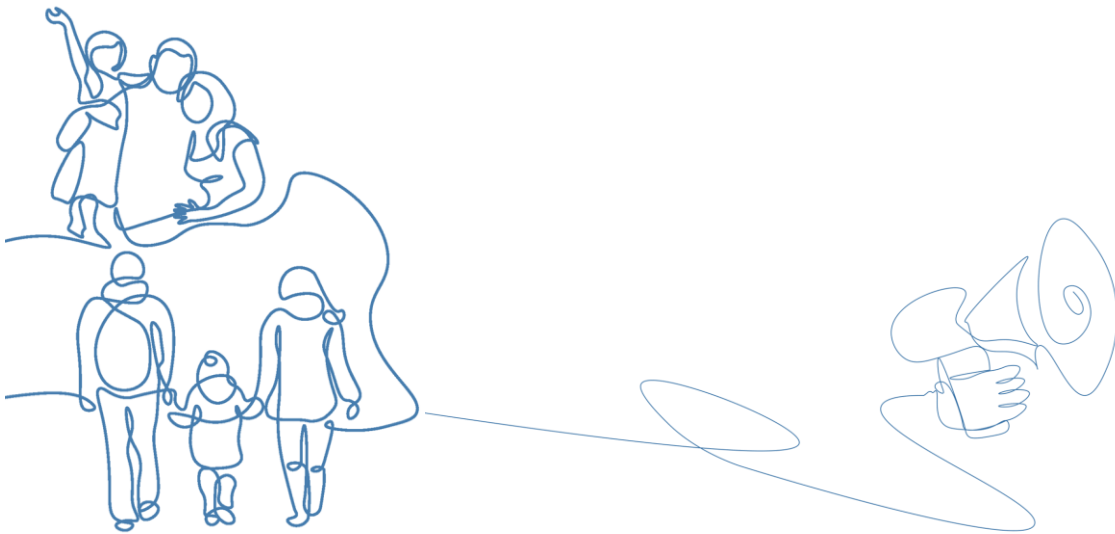
-State Key Informant

Others learned the value of incorporating family voice when they had the opportunity to engage with parent leaders within their own agency or see it modeled in another agency or group.



*When I first began, it wasn't completely registering with me. But as the work progressed, we really understood the value when a parent finally joined our team and started sharing their voice. And then I did go to a Perinatal Collaborative meeting and they had a parent there who was **very** involved and shared their voice. And so then it was clicking that, "Okay, this is a really important piece of our work. We need to have parent voice at our table."*

-Local Key Informant



# ORIGINS OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN

Across state key informants, a timeline of parent leadership efforts in Michigan emerged (see Exhibit 2 for just those activities mentioned during key informant interviews).

*Exhibit 2. Overview of major parent leadership initiatives in Michigan described by key informants*



\*CSHCS=Children's Special Health Care Services; IDEA=Individual with Disabilities Education Act

Most of these were discussed as processes and movements, often years in the making, rather than discrete events. State key informants believed that grassroots motivation paired with state support and funding was needed to get parent leadership systems in place. There was also a sense that the benefit of learning directly from families and bringing them to the table for systems work was recognized by many for a long time, but champions were needed to actualize the concept of parent leadership and bring intentional strategy to build the structures and supports necessary for inception and sustainability.

# INDIVIDUAL CHAMPIONS

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State key informants described how parent leadership evolved in the state. When asked to identify key people involved in parent leadership efforts in Michigan, 21 different individuals were named by the 11 key informants. Some key informants who were the earliest champions of parent leadership described how they were able to harness the skills they honed as educated professionals to advocate for their own families. They acknowledged that not all families had the same privilege that education and financial security afford to be advocates. These key informants recognized that for parent leadership to be equitably incorporated into systems work, the system needed to support family engagement beyond privileged families who could afford to volunteer their time and money. These early champions were active within the agencies that impacted their children.



*And we actually still have some of those parents around today who were the people who said, "Things need to change." And they had personal experiences and they said, "I think this stuff should change. I want to try to make a change in my community or I want to try to make a change to this system." And a lot of them were never paid. They put in all of their own money to travel back and forth to Lansing, or to attend meetings, and I think a lot of that is where some of the policies that we have in place now came from. Or I don't think; I know because they're like, "Okay, if we're going to do this," then they would say, "I had the means to be able to drive myself to Lansing." Right? "I had the means to be able to participate, but other families do not have that. So if we want more voices at the table, we need to figure this out."*

-State Key Informant



# BUILDING A PARENT LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

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Early efforts at systems building included securing funding to support parent voice, articulating the culture and activities of parent engagement to build institutional expectations, and documenting processes so they could be replicated. Within home visiting, several state key informants cited the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program funding cycle when state leaders established a new parent partnership system in the state through home visiting Local Leadership Groups (LLGs) and a statewide parent leadership group of LLG parent leaders as a key moment in building a parent leadership system in the state. Another notable event came in 2008 when multiple agencies braided funding to support the Parents Partnering for Change training as part of the Parent Leadership in State Government (PLISG) initiative.

Processes and documentation were created as parent leadership systems were built. State and local key informants credited these with creating language and culture around parent leadership to build institutional expectations. For example, one state key informant noted their agency's requirement that new partners have a parent engagement system. State key informants suggested that a key role for state leaders is to update parent leadership materials and processes to meet the needs of parent leaders based on lessons that have been learned over time.



*I was part of the team that really transitioned it into being virtual. And then spent a lot of time—gosh, a year and a half, two years ago now—updating the curriculum to make sure that it was fresh and using really good examples and really helping families connect with one another and feel like they're a part of a community of parent leaders.*

-State Key Informant

This culture and expectation of parent engagement starts to impact others in the system and spreads as early childhood professionals network and learn about parent leadership efforts across agencies and regions.



*But we kind of kept saying, "But wait. Why aren't parents here? But wait. Why aren't parents here?" And it was kind of an iterative process of growing it. So all of the places that parents are now and that were looking for them wasn't there in the beginning.*

-State Key Informant

## Recruiting parent leaders and supporting them so they can use their voice.

Local key informants discussed that a key role for local leaders and organizations is to continue to help recruit new parent leaders through relying on established relationships with partner organizations. Trusted partners could help identify and bring in new voices to parent leadership.

Local key informants were asked how parent leaders were identified in the community. They discussed that parent leaders were identified by home visiting staff, by partner agencies and organizations, through being involved in other early childhood activities or programs, by other parents already involved in parent leadership, through community events and outreach, and through social media.



*So currently the process has been our home visiting staff has been amazing. So they'll be like, "Hey, I have these parents who they really want to share something" or they'll just invite them to our meetings and it's our door is always open, so to any community members to any parents. But our home visiting staff have done an awesome job of making that connection, building that trust, and then saying, "Hey, come join this meeting."*

-Local Key Informant

Key informants from both levels discussed that funding and reimbursement policies to support parents were barriers to including parent voice. Key informants discussed the reality that many parents needed financial supports, including supports for tangible needs such as childcare, mileage, meals, and transportation, to engage in parent leadership. They also identified that parents needed the financial support ahead of, or at the time of, participating. Having to wait to be reimbursed for expenses prohibited some parents from engaging in parent leadership activities and opportunities.

Key informants at both levels discussed how many of these barriers have been addressed, leading to a number of successes for including parent voice. This included developing and adopting reimbursement policies and practices that met the needs of parents (including covering tangible needs), developing and implementing trainings that helped parent leaders develop leadership skills and learn how to successfully share their stories, and having passionate advocates that were also parents in developing systems structures.



*Parent reimbursement had been a big issue. Parents are putting money out of their own pocket for transportation to get to the meetings, for childcare, for gas. And they would wait months for reimbursement because of the way our process worked.*

-Local Key Informant

These successful system adaptations, in turn, led to the success of parent leaders having more opportunities to share their voice, as they were prepared and supported to participate in leadership activities.



*We reimbursed their childcare, their transportation, and then we paid them hourly honorariums. So it was really—it was in some ways it was an evolution of what happened.*

-State Key Informant



*So I think I have spoken to a few successes of parents who have developed their leadership skills so much that they become community level advocates, or state level advocates, or move into professional roles and spaces there. It's amazing to me how many of the Parent Leadership in State Government parents I have seen come back around in other roles and pop up in leadership roles now 15 years down the line at their different community agencies around the state.*

-State Key Informant



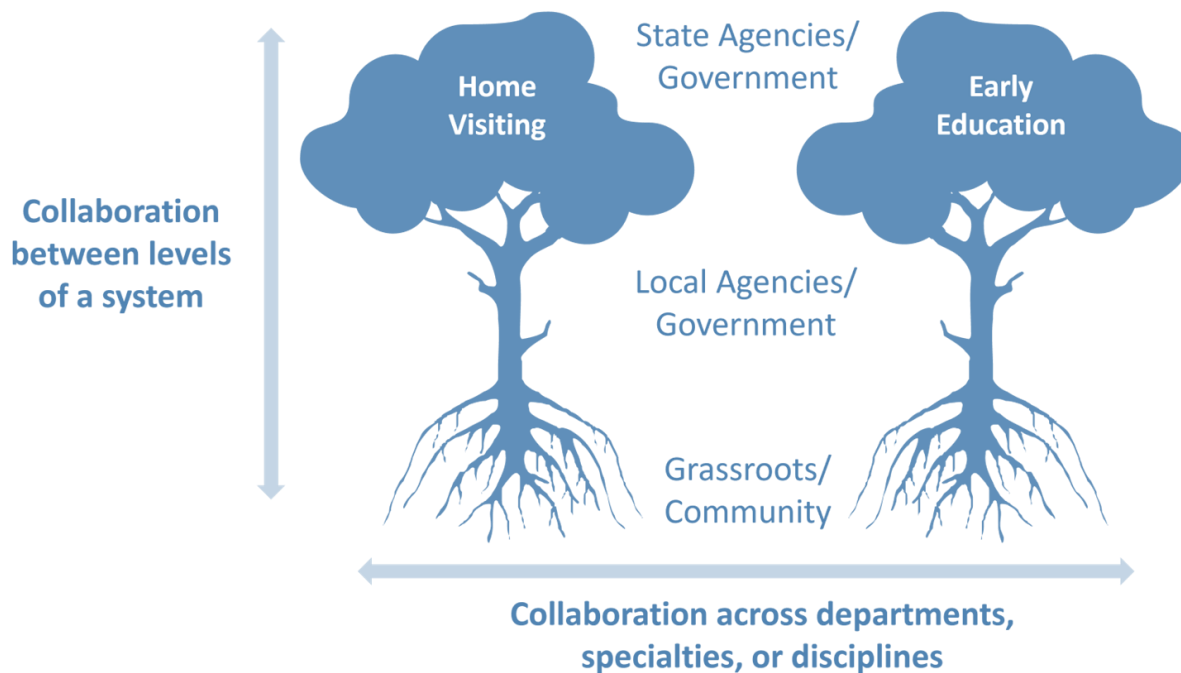
*So she was a peer for them who could talk to them and support them and she did some professional development support TA calls work with them at that time that were helpful in supporting parents in that uneasy space after they have done the training, they're feeling passionate and strong coming out of that Parents Partnering for Change training, and now they have to put that into practice with a local group whose members may not have been trained in any sort of engagement pieces. So she's certainly helped in that space. And the fact that they brought in that piece, I think, was really important to the success of the parents.*

-State Key Informant

# COLLABORATION BETWEEN LEVELS OF A SYSTEM AND ACROSS DISCIPLINES

A major theme that emerged from the key informant interviews centered on collaboration. They discussed collaboration in two main ways. “Vertical” collaboration involved coordinated efforts between grassroots or community-driven activities, activities at the local level, and activities at the state level. They discussed “horizontal” collaboration largely using the term siloes to describe the need to collaborate across departments, agencies, or disciplines (see Exhibit 3 as an example).

*Exhibit 3. Key informants described two types of collaborations: vertical and horizontal*



All key informants were asked to reflect on the degree to which parent-led initiatives came from grassroots or bottom-up efforts, the degree to which they came from the state or top-down efforts, and the degree to which these two systems worked together. Key informants at both state and local levels reflected on how the origins of parent leadership often centered on parents who were personally motivated to make change and that energy is critical to the success of parent-centered work. Even within a formal state-sponsored parent leadership system, if parent voice is truly centered, then family wants and needs are being heard. Local level leaders were in a position of working more closely with families and thus had greater opportunity to hear and respond to family needs.



*I think I guess I could say what sparked it is that—and I can say from my experience of listening to other states, listening to people in my same position in other states, everything started with a grassroots level and we can't let go of that. And you need to also have people who are in positions where they can make some of these things happen.*

-State Key Informant



*I often feel like we have the most to learn from (laughs) the local level because they are closer to the families and working alongside them. And I hope we can do a better job of learning from the local level. Like that's something I am interested in is understanding what is going on at the local level and what I can learn from them.*

-State Key Informant



*I think that when we have been our strongest, there has been a tighter connection between local and state level. And that parent leaders who are doing things in the local communities are able to see themselves as part of something bigger.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels acknowledged the tension between organic parent-driven movements and state-funded systems building initiatives. While these two approaches to bringing about change can work together, some key informants spoke about the distrust between these approaches.



*And too many times, it's been built as a battle between the grassroots group and the system and they're fighting with each other instead of the system recognizing how much it could grow and benefit and improve from bringing these voices in and integrated them, instead of holding it out here kind of at arm's length.*

-State Key Informant





State-level key informants described how, as parent leaders were employed by early childhood agencies, the distinction between grassroots parent leadership and state employees became blurred. However, they also observed that the parents who rise to roles in state government wear two hats—as both a parent with a personal story and as a professional who can navigate state government.



*...as people getting—moving into—and I don't mean this in a negative way—but infiltrating (laughs) state government as people kind of moved from their job what the parent had and because they had developed skills, and ability, and knowledge, they moved into other positions and they brought that experience as a parent and the experience of that being valued with them. But I don't think a lot of it's at the top of the system. I think it's at kind of in the middle or lower part of the system. And I think the top of the system, to be very honest, is pretty oblivious to this. I mean I know the governor created a parent council, but for example, every parent on that council is a professional. Where are the parents who don't wear a professional hat? And that's a balance that we've learned over the years, you've got to have that balance of people that don't have a professional hat on.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels also acknowledged that intentional state funding allowed parent leadership to thrive in Michigan. Even if early champions were operating at the grassroots levels themselves, the injection of federal funding through the state and linking parent engagement to funding is what enabled a formal parent leadership system to develop and thrive.



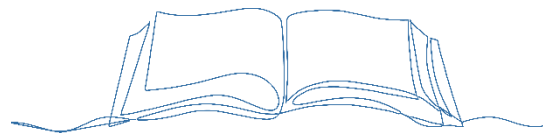
*...everything that I have been involved in has certainly been deeply funded from the state level or from the national level. And was more that funding coming down and that effort coming down to encourage it.*

-State Key Informant



*Because without learning from the upper levels, I don't know if there would have been a clear understanding about parent voice, I don't know if we would have done all of the recruitment that we needed to do or got all of the information to have the certain stakeholders at our table.*

-Local Key Informant



State key informants noted siloes that exist around parent leadership in different agencies and organizations that limit shared learning, approaches, and systems capacity building. Parent leadership work happens throughout the state, but there isn't always communication or collaboration across agencies and organizations. Key informants acknowledged that a role for state leaders is to encourage collaboration across agencies to create connections around common goals to move parent leadership forward.






*Yet there's so much else to the system that those parents don't participate in, don't have experience with, that they can't really speak to and influence. But I think it's kind of some of the systems really see the silo and they don't understand that it can't just be built here. It has to be built here, and here, and here, and here, and here. **And** those things would all benefit from being connected with each other. We can do much more if we connect it all.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels discussed successes in addressing siloes including connecting the local and state levels, which led to more diffusion of information and increased networking across agencies. These successes led to continued collaboration across local and state organizations, which was a facilitator in identifying new parent leaders, adapting policies and procedures, and establishing funding sources. Key informants discussed collaborating with many Michigan organizations, national organizations, and states around parent leadership. Exhibit 4 below lists the partners that key informants discussed having collaborated with on parent leadership.

*Exhibit 4. Summary of agencies, partners, and states mentioned by key informants as important in collaboration around parent leadership work*

 <b>Michigan Agencies &amp; Programs</b>	 <b>Other States</b>	 <b>National Groups</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home Visiting Programs</li> <li>• Great Start Collaboratives &amp; Parent Coalitions</li> <li>• Early On</li> <li>• MI Hands and Voices</li> <li>• Early Childhood Investment Corporation</li> <li>• MI Alliance for Families</li> <li>• Head Start</li> <li>• Parent Leadership in State Government/ Parents Partnering for Change</li> <li>• Safe Sleep</li> <li>• Parent and Family Leadership and Engagement Learning Community</li> <li>• MI Inter-Agency Coordinating Council</li> <li>• Early childhood cross agency group</li> <li>• Philips Company</li> <li>• Children Trust Michigan</li> <li>• Family Resource Centers</li> <li>• Michigan Public Health Institute</li> <li>• MI Department of Education</li> <li>• Behavioral Health</li> <li>• Michigan Family Voices</li> <li>• Children's Special Healthcare Services</li> <li>• Women, Infants, &amp; Children (WIC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• California</li> <li>• Colorado</li> <li>• Georgia</li> <li>• Illinois</li> <li>• Indiana</li> <li>• Massachusetts</li> <li>• New York</li> <li>• North Carolina</li> <li>• Ohio</li> <li>• Oregon</li> <li>• Rhode Island</li> <li>• Texas</li> <li>• Wisconsin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN)</li> <li>• National Educational Development Center</li> <li>• National Pritzker Early Childhood</li> <li>• National Children's Trust Fund Alliance</li> <li>• National Home Visiting Programs</li> </ul>

Key informants identified how collaborating across Michigan organizations led to sharing and learning from others around parent engagement practices including trainings, supporting advocacy, establishing parent advisory groups, practices to expand family voice, developing resource centers and sharing materials, advancing health equity within parent engagement work, expanding opportunities for parents, and sharing lessons learned. Examples of concrete ways organizations collaborated included grant writing, parent engagement needs assessment, meeting with content experts, developing structures for parent leadership, documenting experience and processes, and brainstorming on how to move the work forward in innovative ways.



*We have family resource centers and one of the key parts of family resource centers, which indirectly may be involving home visiting as well is having a parent advisory council and having them help drive the work and build the work and having community engagement as well around these family resource centers. So definitely collaborating across the state on what others are doing and how they're creating their parent advisories.*

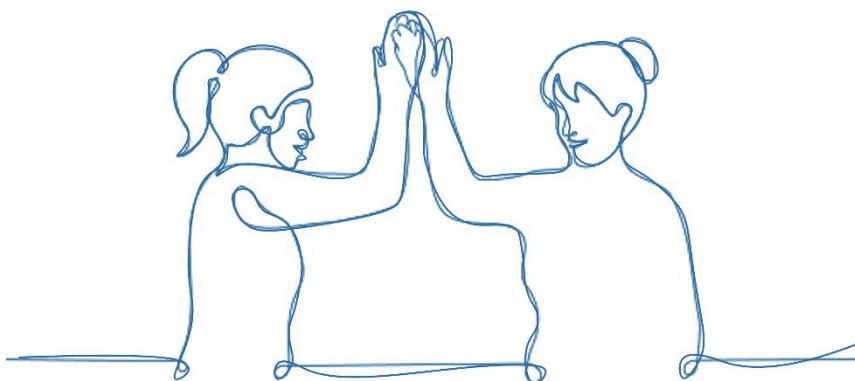
-State Key Informant

Collaborative work with other states and national partners highlighted by key informants included continuous quality improvement efforts, sharing systems building experiences, offering support for systems building activities such as trainings, consultation on framework development, leading trainings, and establishing national groups for parent engagement.



*So for example, most recently when I worked with North Carolina and Oregon, knowing that they had done a lot of research about what's out there, like who's done what, they distilled a lot of things and created their own. And really looking at, "Gosh, look how far we've come that we have so many of these different frameworks." And none of them are wrong. They're just something to get your head around, "Okay, how are you approaching it and what language are you using for these things?"*

-State Key Informant



Key informants, especially at the state level, reflected on lessons learned about collaborative efforts. These included the importance of learning from other organizations' experience, the importance of being intentional about collaboration, the fact that multiple contributions to ideas makes the work better, and the fact that everyone has a different knowledge base around the work. Key informants reflected that they observed through collaboration that there is not one way to do parent engagement work, but that across approaches passion is important. Key informants offered benefits of collaborating at the national level, including learning about different frameworks and language used around parent leadership, learning from other state experiences and finding validation that many states experience similar challenges to Michigan, becoming aware of the need for documentation to not lose institutional knowledge, and validating the need for a formalized network of people involved in parent leadership work. Key informants observed that Michigan is often considered a leader in this space.



*They brought me in to help them develop how to do parent partnership within CQI at the national level. So a lot of that I mean was developing toolkits and pulling together things we had learned in Michigan to really support a number of other states in home visiting, figuring out how to do it.*

-State Key Informant



# SCALING UP AS THE PARENT LEADERSHIP SYSTEM EXPANDED

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According to state key informants, some of the parent leadership systems were established as smaller-scale pilot efforts. Key informants described the challenge of bringing systems and structures to scale. One challenge included avoiding tokenism as parent engagement became a funding requirement. Key informants at both levels described having to work with professional partners to distinguish between fulfilling a technical requirement on parent leadership and engaging parents fully as equal partners. Another challenge included finding strategies for engaging parents more fully in systems efforts, as there were parents who gained confidence and were ready for more opportunities.



*And so really, again, getting down to—getting the parents where they need to be and the providers where they need to be to be kind of eye-to-eye with the parents and utilizing that parent voice and not just having them sit there. I call them seat fillers. That it's not just a check on a sign-in sheet, "Yep, we have our parent. Okay, we're good. Let's go with the meeting and pretend this parent's not here."*

-Local Key Informant



*So we're kind of at that pivot point right now with our current Local Leadership Group where we have some parents who feel more confident and ready. And so the goal is that they start facilitating some pieces or they might want to be the lead on our CQI [Continuous Quality Improvement]. Or they might have a really, really awesome training that they want to go and get trained so that they're the trainer.*

-Local Key Informant



State key informants noted that a key role for state leaders was to continue to look for opportunities to grow the parent leadership system, including identifying and securing funding to support parent leadership. Another key role of state partners was to be advocates for parent leadership work to justify the investment and demonstrate its value.



*You know, I think our role is to really model that and to show that it works. Our role is to advocate in a way or maybe advocate some of us aren't able to advocate, but to educate the importance of parent leadership and the impact. And to remind people making decisions that this impacts parents so parent voice is very valuable. How often we can often save dollars by having parent voice because if we think something is going to work, we implement it and we find out it didn't work, then it's just, right, it can cost systems more to have to go back and figure out what's not working when we could be asking parents right from the beginning because it impacts them and they're the ones that have to utilize that system or that service.*

-State Key Informant

Scaling also meant that some of the smaller pilot efforts needed to expand beyond the key personnel who were coordinating and facilitating them. Key informants at the state level described barriers to expanding pilot efforts through the early childhood system. Without comprehensive documentation and training of new staff, the system lost institutional knowledge and shared history as people left and new stakeholders were engaged. At the same time key informants acknowledged the importance of turnover and fresh voices to guide the system. For example, key informants felt it was important to engage parent leaders who had recent experiences engaging with early childhood systems.



*I think lived experiences, it also for me lived experiences should be fairly current and relevant. Because sometimes we can still be pulling parents in with lived experiences from 10-15-20 years ago and it might not be—things change, society changes and so sometimes those folks will bring a different lens now to it than those that might be in the recent last five years.*

-State Key Informant

State key informants also described how parent leadership quickly grew beyond the capacity of the system. They described not having the funding to fully support parent leadership, including the positions needed to support parents, not having professional development opportunities available for parents, and as not being able to support parent leaders ongoing growth. They noted that a process needed to be developed to support parent leaders to continue to grow into professional positions, for example. They also described how, while current trainings provide parents skills, they are not always preparing parent leaders for real-world challenges or how to engage in systems change work.



*I think the other struggle we ran into is as we were trying to grow it, we kind of got to a point where some of the families and people were ready to grow beyond what we had the system capacity to continue to encompass and include. So that the system kind of fell behind where the families were and ready to move on to. And that's some of the impetus behind that kind of apprenticeship and career lattice project I talked about... It's recognizing that we may have built a base and that there's a lot of these parents who are ready to fly and we're not as a system, not keeping up with that and not thinking broadly enough about it and we need to see that as kind of another level we need to go to and we're not there.*

-State Key Informant



*"We need to expand. Let's justify it." But there's always that time lag in how you can do it. But the problem was, even when we got to that place of expansion... all it did was give more money. With more money came more responsibility and now you had staff to on board. So all's it did was for me, put me in a position where I now had to work 75 hours a week just to keep my balls in the air.*

-State Key Informant

Some key informants described an inherent tension in parent leadership. On one hand, state key informants described how parent leadership is "heart work" and parent leaders need to center their mission on the passion to advocate for families. On the other hand, key informants at both levels acknowledged the need to pay parents for their time, especially for families who need additional supports to attend meetings and other leadership events. Without adequate support for parent engagement, professionals were not learning from the communities who need the most support.



*And I think that there were some things where we had to learn over time. Little things that are big things, like not leading with the money. Not saying, "I'm going to pay you \$50 to come to this meeting," where I think that that's where we started with some of the misunderstandings of what really creates parent leadership. That it's about the passion and drive; it's not about the money. Right (laughs)? But we should be removing barriers and compensating people as equals at the table. However, it's not money that drives this thing.*

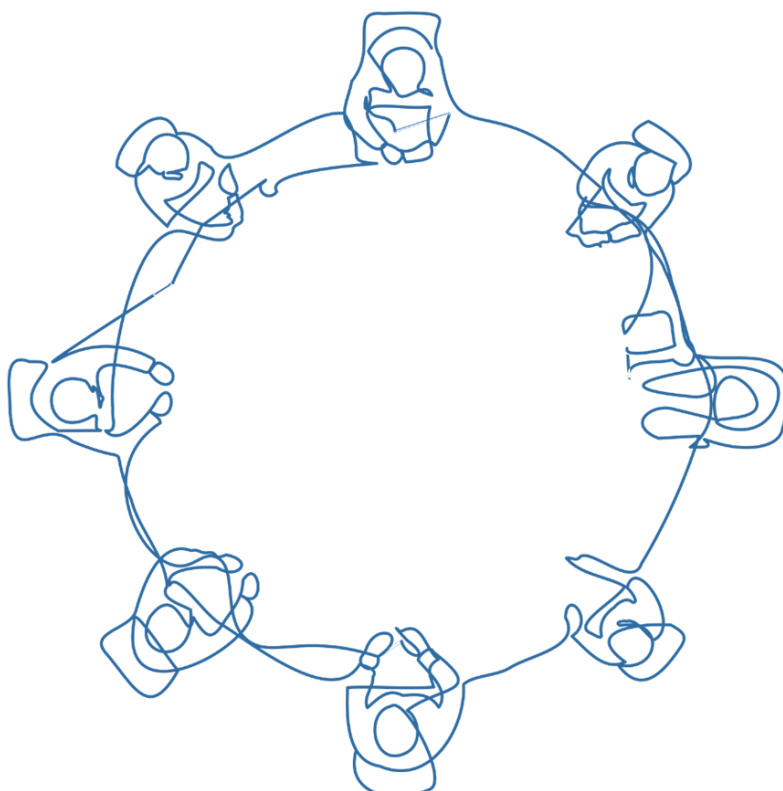
-State Key Informant

State key informants discussed that a lesson learned around scaling was that current leaders and facilitators need to be prepared to transition to new leaders and have structures in place that ensure the transition goes smoothly for parent leaders. They also noted that not having appropriate plans and structures in place impacted the functioning of parent leadership groups. Key informants at both levels shared that continuity and expansion of parent leadership systems requires mentorship for parent leaders and continued funding for tangible supports to engage in the work. State key informants also noted that parents need a system that meets them where they are, rather than the current one-size-fits-all approach and that parents need trained and prepared facilitators to feel supported.



*...we had hired parent leaders and we transitioned my role to them. And so I was a backup system, if you will. And again, you have to know there's things that in hindsight I can tell you, we didn't understand how to transition some of it very well.*

-State Key Informant





## Increasing Parent Voices at the Table and Diversity of Voice

One core purpose of engaging parent leaders in systems work is to create an opportunity for parents to share insight and knowledge on how to improve the early childhood service system. Key informants at both levels hoped and believed that changes that are parent-informed or parent-driven, and incorporate lived experience, have the greatest positive impact on many Michigan families.



*I think the ultimate goal is making sure parents get what they need. And you don't get that unless you have parents at the table helping make these decisions that are—because otherwise, it's what people think parents need.*

-State Key Informant



*So I think lived experience for me is more than just their experience with the system. It's their experience in their community, it's their experience and skill set that they've developed through their life. It might be resiliency skills that they've developed because of ACES in their past.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels described the goal of personal growth for parent leaders engaged in the early childhood system. Part of parent leaders finding their voice required understanding how their personal experiences relate to a broader community.



*So the goals for our parents are to really bring perspective, bring their lived experience to our table, drive any sort of change, have their voice heard. Building confidence has been something that's been brought up a ton so that they can reduce stigma, so that they can give referrals, so that they can really drive change in our community.*

-Local Key Informant

Key informants at both levels indicated that a key role for state and local leaders and organizations is advocating for parent voice to be included at various tables. Key informants shared different experiences about this process as evidenced by the quotes below. While some highlighted the struggle to get professionals to understand the value of parent voice, others suggested the transition was more organic.



*Although I think a lot of times, those are implemented as a box to check, “we did it because you told us we had to.” But it doesn’t mean that it’s really having a whole lot of influence on the system, or that they’re really listening, or that those parents have been really told that their voice matters and what they’re bringing to the table can make a difference.*

-State Key Informant



*We also wanted to make sure that everyone in our community and our region understood that the parent voice is the driving force and that they needed to be at our table. The importance of them being at our table. And that was an easy concept that everyone grasped really quickly. I just don’t think it was something that was really thought of initially.*

-Local Key Informant

State key informants discussed that a barrier in including parent voice is the lack of diversity in parent voices that are heard. They discussed this as being due to a lack of new parent leaders and voices that are engaged in parent leadership, leading to many of the same parent leaders being involved in various activities. They discussed this, in turn, as leading to burnout among those parent leaders that are engaged in a variety of activities. State key informants also described a lack of representation at the table of some communities and identities. Local key informants discussed that it was hard to expand representation of parent leaders due to it being hard for many parents to participate in meetings or activities around their other family obligations.



*I guess one of the lessons and basic tenets is that no matter how you have been involved in it, you always have to try to—the same way that professionals at the beginning had to be willing to listen to parents, even if you’re a parent involved in it—you have to always be willing to transition your role, and listen, and be open to new ways of thinking and new ways of doing it.*

-State Key Informant

State key informants also discussed that, when parent leaders transition into professional roles, their viewpoint changes. They discussed that once parent leaders become professionals in the system, they are less able to represent their parent voice and need to take on the voice of an employee within the system in their work.



*But we talk about this all the time where once somebody moves into a professional role, are they truly representing the voice of a parent? Right? They are now representing a systems perspective as opposed to just—not “just”, but that parent perspective.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels discussed that there have been important lessons learned about including parent voice over the years. State key informants indicated that there needs to be more representation and voices involved in parent leadership, particularly representation from parents who face systemic oppression. Especially in the early years of parent leadership, parent leaders were often from privileged families who had the time and financial support to volunteer. This meant that whole communities in the state did not have parent representation.



*..the families were volunteers and predominantly in most communities, what we had was a middle class group—a group of middle class people. We didn't actually get into the neighborhoods who had the most to teach us. A few of those really did some deep learning. So there are some communities who actually did know how to do that and did it well. But the system as a whole, we didn't.*

-State Key Informant



*But a lot of parents—and many times the parents we **really** want to work with when we're thinking about equity, they haven't had those opportunities. They haven't had leadership opportunities.*

-State Key Informant

Local key informants noted that virtual engagement has allowed more individuals to participate in parent leadership activities, as it has addressed some of the barriers to in-person participation. State key informants discussed that a facilitator of having more parent participants is that they each bring unique skills, perspectives, and knowledge to the work.



*So I can't give you a definite answer, but on average, I want to say maybe like 8-9 people were attending these virtual meetings and now we're in the mid-20s to low 30s.*

-Local Key Informant



# AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS AS A CENTRAL FEATURE OF A PARENT LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

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A major process goal articulated by key informants was to build trusting relationships among parent leaders and between parent leaders and early childhood professionals. Key informants felt strongly that systems change and personal growth would only thrive from authentic relationships.



*We really feel like relationships—I think so many of us feel like relationships are the cornerstone of everything. And with relationships comes trust. So parents—I would say that anybody—so say I am just walking into a new experience. When you have somebody who is a colleague, a manager, a supervisor, somebody who is specifically assigned as the mentor to help you understand like what are the day-to-day workings of what I am stepping into, what is expected of me, how should I act when I go to these different things, what if I am asked a question and I don't know the answer. Or just if I was new to something or if anybody else is coming in new, we would hope that that would be in place.*

-State Key Informant



*Yeah, so you build these really, really tight almost like friendships where it's not always just talking now about home visiting. It might be like, "How's your kids? How is your day? How is everything going?" and you're building trust within the group. So that's really, really cool.*

-Local Key Informant

Key informants from both levels discussed that barriers to working towards authentic relationships included the transition to a virtual environment after the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted relationships for parent leaders and the ability to do leadership work. They also discussed the virtual environment as leading to issues in navigating conflicts that arose within the group, which contributed to parent leaders feeling less safe. State level informants discussed that the transition to virtual meetings occurred at the same time as transitions in leadership of some of the parent leader groups and that this made it a particularly challenging time for parent leadership in general to keep moving forward.



*Now I can tell you it went through a **dramatic** change. The pivot from Covid was its own challenge, for sure, to the group. Both because more people could join, so it was a positive that way. **But** because it was via Zoom, the meetings were now two hours, we had people who didn't meet face-to-face, so you didn't have the same kind of community coming together...*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels discussed that lessons learned around relationships were that parents need to feel that they are in an open and trusting environment to develop and maintain authentic relationships. Only when they feel safe to share their voice and authentic selves are they able to engage in parent leadership. Key informants at both levels also discussed that developing strong relationships with and between parents is a key component to helping them feel included and finding their voice.



*And multiple of our parents have kind of fallen back on that and said, "I know this is a safe place for me." Again, to be honest. "I can give honest feedback of things I do and don't like and it's because it's an environment of kind of having that open communication."*

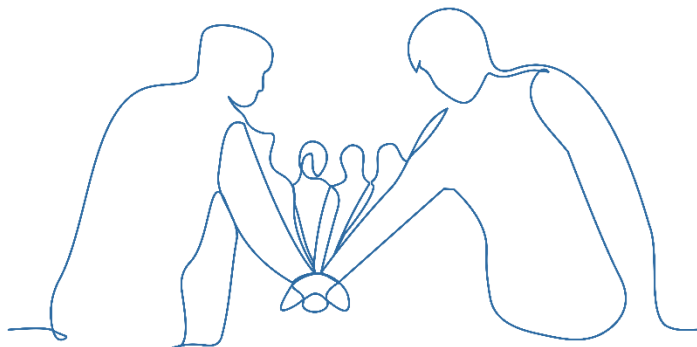
-Local Key Informant

Key informants at both levels also discussed how developing trust and relationships with and between family members, home visitors, and organizations has been a facilitator to parents feeling valued and part of the work. In turn, parents that have strong relationships and trust were described as being more engaged in the work.



*It's a lot is just building those relationships. Like that's a huge part of it and like that comfortability of like, "Yeah, I want to be a part of this!" Versus, like I said, coming, little checkbox. "Okay, yep, you're here. We're good. Let's keep going." And that really prompts a lot more engagement because they **know** their purpose, they know why they're there, they know that they're wanted to be there. Yeah, so I mean I think having those relationships.*

-Local Key Informant



# CHANGING MINDSETS TO EMPOWER PARENT VOICE AND ADDRESS POWER DYNAMICS

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Both state and local key informants discussed that a key step to helping parents become empowered and find their voice was to change the mindsets of both professionals and parent leaders to see families as assets and knowledgeable partners at the table. This was especially true as the system engaged families receiving services that have income eligibility requirements. State key informants described that an empowerment approach to parent leadership in home visiting was critical when challenging the idea that families only qualified for services because their family was “broken”.



*I would say something that very significantly impacted the design and the implementation of that parent leader group was coming at it from an approach of empowerment. Really taking a look and saying, “We’re in a situation where the families who have access to home visiting have access because they have to meet a criteria of ‘brokenness’ to get in.” And that is a way that a system unintentionally is turning the family unintentionally into a victim. And now the system’s going to rescue them. So the system’s actually unintentionally persecuting.*

-State Key Informant

Another professional mindset that needed shifting was the pace of work when parents are involved. State key informants recognized that processes needed to slow down for the successful inclusion of parent voice at the table.



*I think one of the lessons is things can sometimes move slower, not always a bad thing, right? Because either you need to keep (pauses)—the opportunity and the window for them to share and that may take time or they might have more questions so you may have to pause more often, right, to get their engagement and their valuable information that they’re willing to share to really capture their voice. So sometimes things can move a little bit slower and I think that committees or systems need to be okay with that because sometimes they want things done in a faster timeframe.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants also noted that professionals within the system needed to recognize that parents bring unique expertise and to embrace inclusive practices before they were able to create space for authentic parent voice. This was also described in terms of power dynamics that needed to be recognized and shifted so that parents and professionals could view each other as equal partners at the table.



*I think one thing when we talk about power dynamics is the focus of it... just coming into the room and the respecting that like the parent has, you know, they've got this lived experience, this is what their value is, this is something that the others at the table can't bring to it. So that mind shift or yeah, that change of mindset.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels discussed that state and local leaders needed to see how their mindsets and practices could either exclude parent voice or empower parent voice. They described how professionals at the state and local level learned to support parents in shifting their own mindsets in order to find their voice, realize the power of using their voice to make changes, and take ownership of the work being done.



*And really kind of helping parents get out of that mentality that you are not just a parent. You are your child's parent and you are going to push more for your child than anybody else, even people with the best intentions. And so getting parents that kind of like empowerment and that it's okay to ask questions, it's okay to push back, and it doesn't like diminish you as a parent by asking those questions and getting that clarity.*

-Local Key Informant

Key informants from both levels acknowledged that changing professional mindsets has been challenging. Key informants noted that some professionals accepted that it was required for parents to be at the table but didn't take their contributions seriously. This reality made it hard for parents to feel empowered or to believe that they would be taken seriously by professionals. Key informants noted how some professionals preserved traditional power dynamics, feeling that their voice was more important than parental voice. State leaders also noted how the professional mindset of looking at services as helping "rescue" families was a barrier in that it unintentionally turned families into victims, which made it more challenging for the adoption of an empowerment approach with parent leaders.



*And at times, it was really challenging to change mindsets and to see parent leaders as equals and as valuable and to fight through some of the challenges of actually getting them compensated and how to do that, and to stop people from saying derogatory things about families and seeing them in a deficit base versus a strength base.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels discussed several lessons that were learned around changing mindsets. They described how professionals needed to understand that lived experience is important to making meaningful and effective changes, the impact that parent voice can have on improving the system and services, and how to partner with parents. Professionals needed to recognize the importance of including parent voice before parents were invited to the table. State key informants discussed that just having parents at the table, but not fully accepted as equals leads to “tokenism”. They felt that that professionals need to be prepared to accept and listen to parents before they are integrated.



*...I think the big lesson is making sure that the community members, the whatever table we're inviting the parents to, that all of the professionals within that realm, that they have an understanding of why the parent voice is important and how to support those parents. Because I think we focus on getting the parents there sometimes and we don't look at that side.*

-State Key Informant

Key informants at both levels acknowledged that there were successes in professionals changing their mindsets to recognize that the inclusion of parent voice is important to improving the delivery of services. They discussed that once professional mindsets changed, parents felt that they were more equals and able to share their perspectives. This led to parents being involved in setting meeting agendas and impacting changes to the ways services were developed and delivered for families. Parents being valued at the table also led to more parents feeling ownership over the work. Key informants discussed that these successes were key to addressing power dynamics between families and professionals and was a facilitator to the inclusion of parent voice.



*...so the first one is that how we have been able to shift mindsets for a lot of partners and grantees who kind of gave like lip service to, “Yeah, we need to include parents.” But it almost seemed like it was a check box that they were just saying, “We just want to check it off and say, “Yes, we met this obligation and we have parents.” And that has shifted for many of our programs and several of them have reached out to say, “We struggled with this at first.” They weren't sure how to do it, they weren't sure the reason for it, and they have found it incredibly valuable. Just having a parent who is part of their program participating and thinking through the implementation has been significant. So I think that has been a big success.*

-State Key Informant



*I see a lot of respect in our group. I mean when (name of parent) contributes, people really listen to what she has to say. They ask her questions. They sort of see her as an expert really because she's received services for a good four-five years and has participated in a couple different programs. So I think that they really value what she brings to the table.*

-Local Key Informant

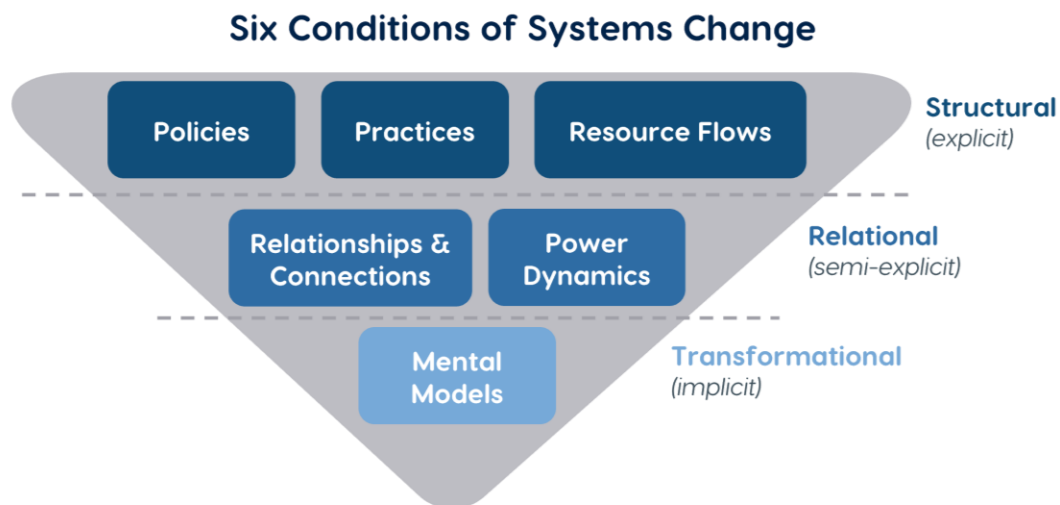


# SYSTEMS IMPACTS OF PARENT LEADERSHIP IN MICHIGAN

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In addition to describing the barriers, facilitators, and successes in the journey to build the parent leadership system in home visiting and early childhood, key informants described how this work changed systems. The systems impacts identified by key informants were organized into the “inverted triangle” framework of the Water of Systems Change (see Exhibit 5).<sup>4</sup> These conditions are policies, practices, and resource flows, which are structural changes; relationships and connections and power dynamics, which are relational changes; and mental models, which are transformative changes.

*Exhibit 5. Six Conditions of Systems Change: Water of Systems Change*



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<sup>4</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change.  
[https://www.fsg.org/resource/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change/](https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/)

Key informants described three distinct phases of systems change that occurred (see Exhibit 6). Many changes were required to prepare early childhood systems for parent leaders. Once a parent leadership system was built, it continued to evolve as improvements and refinements were made to this system. Finally, key informants reported the types of impact the parent leadership system has had on the greater early childhood service delivery system. Key informants also discussed that in many areas, while there had been progress made, that changes were still needed to support parent leadership in Michigan.

*Exhibit 6. Three phases of systems change described by parent leadership in early childhood key informants*



## Structural Changes

Key informants at both levels discussed that a variety of structural changes in the system occurred to include parent voice. This included writing parent leadership into grants that were already funded and collaborating across various organizations to include funding, which led to established funding sources for including parent voices in the system. This included Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding for systems building in Michigan. This funding led to structure changes around the way in which parents were reimbursed, demonstrated by the adoption of reimbursement policies that paid parents prior to or at the time of engagement and included stipends to cover the tangible needs of parents (for example, childcare, meals, travel, and mileage). It also led to the creation of employment positions supporting parent leadership and the development of parent leader trainings. Once parents were able to engage, structural changes occurred in outlining the exact roles and responsibilities of parent leaders and meeting parents where they were at, which made it more clear for how parents were to engage and easier to share their voices. This included changing how parent leaders sign different documents if they didn't have access to a computer or weren't able to print documents. Once parents were clear on how to engage, structural changes occurred that helped them to engage, such as requirements for a certain percentage of parents to be at the tables of various groups. It became clear that while there was parent engagement at a number of tables, there needed to be changes to recruitment practices. Recruitment practices changed to include more diversity and representation of community voices that are most impacted by community services.



*When Michigan first got the MIECHV funding in the state from the feds... she wrote into the grant the building of what would it look like if we began to think about from this as a starting place, these Local Leadership Groups, what would it begin to look like for us to think through how we might develop a parent partnership system within home visiting.*

*-State Key Informant*



*We didn't look at it as something we even had to ask permission for. We said, "If you're going to be evaluating and you're going to be really building in such a way a system in such a way that's going to meet the needs of parents, you can't possibly do that without the parents at the table." So and a lot of times people ask us, "Well, how did you get permission for this?" And we didn't ask permission. We just went based on what we knew worked and I think there is enough room in how you read some words in grant applications and stuff to be able to say, "Here, here, here, here, and here is a natural place for families who are receiving services to be involved." And nobody's ever questioned it. Nobody from HRSA ever pushed back and said, "Well, you can't do that."*

-State Key Informant

The structural changes above led to the inclusion of more parent voices, which in turn led to structural changes in the way early childhood services were thought about, developed, and delivered to families. These changes have included the way in which screenings were conducted for the home visiting program, updates to the core knowledge framework that home visitors should have, updates to the definition for dual enrollment in services, and the way in which professionals thought about the system and delivery of services. The inclusion of parent voices also led to changes in hiring practices. One example they discussed was changing hiring requirements to value and acknowledge parent leadership experience alongside or in lieu of formal education so parent leaders were eligible for professional positions in the home visiting system.



*Yeah, just in our policies and practices, we started with not a super clear set of policies and procedures for the parents. So making sure they understand the role of their work, making sure they understand the importance of their voice, and then talking about the barrier reduction, making sure they understand the forms to get stipends, giving them like we always talk about free apps or ways they can electronically sign things if they don't have a computer or they don't have a way to print something.*

-Local Key Informant



*We have changed how we've added some additional core knowledge competencies that parents believe home visitors should have. Parents were invited to be part of an update on our core knowledge framework and they added competencies and ideas of what they thought would be important for a home visitor to know. We have had parents who have impacted the roll out of other specific screening tools at the state level. We have had parents impact the definition of dual enrollment for home visiting here in Michigan through participation within the home visiting advisory and other Local Leadership Groups.*

-State Key Informant



*We have one parent leader in Detroit who she's part of HFA and she doesn't have the credentialing to be whatever their educational credentials required to be a home visitor. But because of the parent leadership work, she was the supervisor in that space, advocated at the national office for change to be made for her to be able to be hired as a home visitor, and she's now the supervisor of that program.*

-State Key Informant

While structural changes did occur, key informants at both levels indicated that more changes are still needed to support parents. State key informants discussed that structures that support parent leadership still need to change and evolve to support parents in an ongoing and equitable way. Informants discussed that this included having a more individualized lens in the way each parent leader is supported, an evolution in recruitment practices to not only focus on bringing in new voices but focus on bringing on the voices of those most impacted by early childhood services, having a reimbursement system that is individualized and pays parents based on the amount of work they are involved with, having more designated funding for parent leadership, providing more supports to seasoned parent leaders to continue in leadership activities past when they age out of the current system, and creating stronger follow-up processes. Local key informants discussed the need for more education for home visitors on understanding the importance of the Local Leadership Groups and expanding trainings for parents and professionals that focus on the importance of including parent voice and building leadership skills.



*And we have a one size fits all reimbursement system. So I think we need to—and I—there's a few people looking into this, but we've got to develop a bit of an almost like career lattice, apprenticeship to and scaffold the way we're paying people. Because having someone come in and tell you their lived experience and story is a whole different skill base than asking them to come design a meeting and facilitate it. And yet, we're acting as though it's a one size fits all. So we've got to—we need to—it's calling us to refine our system around it. -State Key Informant*  
*That we're not getting new parents. Babies are being born every day. There are new parents coming into home visiting and other programs and services **all** the time. And we need to be learning from them because things change. And if we're listening to the same—I mean that we have to balance the, "I'm building, building, building, building on your leadership and here you are" and bringing in new parents all the time. And I think that sometimes it's gotten a little stagnant in getting new parents in because new faces in leadership and local communities and in the support.*

-State Key Informant

## Relational Changes

State key informants discussed that relational changes in the system occurred to foster collaboration across some organizations and individuals to work toward shared goals around parent leadership. An example of this included state agencies being involved in the Individual with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) Part C funding that supports early intervention for children from birth to age two. These agencies collaborated with the Early Childhood Investment Corporation around parent leadership work. State key informants also discussed that systems had to change to build relationships, which helped to neutralize power dynamics between professionals and parents.



*So when the opportunities came for these big federal home visiting grants, we were all already part of the group that was meeting about early childhood collaboration so we were already all in a position to help contribute to and give input to how that grant would be written and some ideas about what could happen. And that that is where we also had in Michigan at the same time, the Early Childhood Investment Corporation had started to establish local Great Start Collaboratives and a very strong parent component of that. So we made a very deliberate choice to build on that and build on that idea in some ways in parallel and required that it be connected to that parent growth and those parent organizations.*

-State Key Informant



*If you're going to get anywhere with it, you have to be meeting as two people who both care about the system and have common goals and find the common goal where you can start to talk about how parents can contribute to that common goal. And it's you really have to—it very much is finding those common areas and being able to start to see how what I'm asking you to do can help you to achieve what **you** want. And that doesn't happen because you're from the state. That happens because you build a relationship with people and those power dynamics are **really** critical. And—and I think helping people—helping parents to see the people they're working with as people, not the system, not the organization, not the title; and then helping them to see the parents not as a person who is broken and needs to be helped but as a person who has something valuable to bring to the table and it's a different kind of contribution maybe than the professionals have, but you're better for having both. So it **really** does break down the power dynamics and the positions we're in to really having to see each other as people that have something to contribute and finding our common goals.*

-State Key Informant

State key informants discussed how having parental involvement led to different types of conversations and new ideas, which in turn led to more collaboration across organizations and individuals. State key informants also discussed how having parents involved led to the development of relationships and the way in which professionals and parents interacted. Having professionals and parents at the table together led to the realization that everyone was on the same side and were working towards the same goals, which ultimately led to the development of trust and stronger relationships and the breakdown of power dynamics.



*I think that's the key to this is that none of this is me alone. This is me working always collaboratively with others because I really believe that the value comes from having all of those brains thinking together and bringing ideas together. -State Key Informant*  
*I think over the years with more and more parent involvement, for the local groups, again, speaking to the LLGs, it can become far more collaborative when parent voice is brought in because it fosters different types of conversations and sometimes even the professional partners will open up a little bit more about challenges that they're having.*

-State Key Informant

While relational changes did occur, key informants at both levels indicated that more changes are still needed to include parent voice. State key informants discussed the need to continue to breakdown siloes and expand collaboration and alignment across a variety of partner organizations. They discussed that partnerships need to continue to expand to include partners that aren't currently at the table but that current partnerships need to more actively work on breaking down the siloes that they often work in. They discussed that this will continue to grow parent leadership throughout the state, lead to more learning opportunities, and leading to the ability to have more of an impact on parent leadership and systems throughout the state. State key informants also discussed that there needs to be changes in the way in which parents are engaged. They discussed that parents need to be engaged in ways that truly foster authentic inclusion at whatever tables they are at and that the "tokenism" of parent leaders by some professionals needs to end.



*But I think this is an opportunity; it's across early childhood and home visiting and it's an opportunity to try to bring all of us together to think through like all of this stuff with parent leadership. It's just not very far along yet. And I don't know that I think everybody who could be included is yet included. But I think there is a lot of opportunity with this group to understand parent voice and parent leaders in the state and then there may be a lot of really good things that come out of it in terms of overall structure for how parents are supported or how some of this comes to be.*

-State Key Informant



*Well, I think sometimes it's in the way that we're talking about families. I mean we have to change the way we're talking to families and how we elevate them and treat them and prepare them. And help them feel like they belong. Right? That the true inclusion is beyond, "We've got a diverse group of people sitting here," but not only am I invited to the table, but I feel like I belong here (laughs)... And language matters. The way that we talk about and the way that we elevate and strengthen families is really important.*

-State Key Informant

## Transformative Changes

Key informants at both levels discussed that transformative changes in the system occurred to allow for parent voice. They discussed examples of professionals changing their mindsets to welcome parent voice and parents beginning to realize the power and value of their voice. State leaders that had been involved in the creation of the parent leadership system discussed changing the ways they thought about leadership of the system, realizing that there comes a time when new voices are needed to continue parent leadership work and that they needed to step aside to pass the torch on to those new voices.



*And it's also not getting too stuck in what **you** knew and what **you** learned and knowing that the world continues and the systems continue to change around us. And what I knew isn't going to help beyond remembering how important it was asking people to listen, and listening to them, and that listening and always being willing to learn and hear and step back to make room for other people. As we do this equity work, we've talked a lot about lived experience and bringing people in from the community level. And it does mean that there's got to be a certain amount of humility to say, "I'm not that person anymore. That person is the one you need to talk to and my job now is to make room for that person and help them to be there."*

-State Key Informant

State key informants also discussed how having parental involvement led to changes in mindsets to value parent voice looking at service delivery differently. They discussed professionals beginning to understand and accept the importance of including parent voice to improve processes and service delivery and welcoming them to the table. Additionally, professional mindsets shifted to recognizing that parent leaders should be the ones helping families in their community learn about services.



*And so I think there's a lack of knowledge about services. And so again, using parents as like that trusted resource to get out there, that's—I mean that's like half the battle right there. If everybody was aware that the services exist, it's going to be a lot easier to reach those hard-to-reach families.*

-Local Key Informant

Key informants also discussed professionals accepting parent leaders as experts and equals at the table and changing practices to reflect the recognition that moving processes was a better way to include parent voice and do the work.



*I think an acceptance of imperfection. It has—it is always a learning space. And I think the programs and spaces for whom it has been the hardest are generally those that are very focused on quick responses to things, are being held to having very quick responses and changes. Because when you bring in parent voice, it often takes a little bit longer to build your group, to build trust, to have that engagement where you get openness between the members.*

-State Key Informant

Mindsets also were changed around recognizing the importance of centering equity and diversity into conversations and practices. Including parent voice also led to changes in how home visiting and other services are marketed and talked about. This was accomplished through changes in the language used for marketing materials and the ways in which professionals talk about services.



*And I think that there have been a lot of really awesome opportunities that have been opened up over time where parents have such great input onto, "Why do you say it like that?!?!" Or, "What do you mean by that? Well, then why don't you say it like that?" And really leaning in on the equity and diversity pieces, really opening things to the way that you are offering this is not equitable, and it's not supportive, and it's offensive. And getting families to the table has really I think brought up a lot of important dialogue about our materials, and the way that we market, and biases that we might hold, which I think is wonderful.*

-State Key Informant





While transformative changes did occur, key informants at both levels indicated that more changes are still needed to include parent voice. Key informants at both levels discussed that there needs to be a focus on continuing to change professional mindsets. While there has been a lot of progress in this area, key informants discussed that work still needs to be done to change some professional mindsets on the importance of including parent voice, on the need to share power with parent leaders to positively impact systems and service delivery, to recognize that meeting practices and timelines need to slowdown to include parent voice, and to change from a mindset of services being there to “fix people” to one of supporting and empowering families.



*It takes money and it takes people power to do this well and to give the supports to families to be engaged. And so it has to be—and when there are tough decisions being made, who actually makes the decisions? And are the decisions informed by what’s best for families? Which is hard. Because that changes the power dynamic and the values of organizations and the state. I mean what do we really care about? Which is hard. I mean systems change is hard. It’s complex.*

-State Key Informant



*So I think there are a lot of ways that the system has changed and there are a lot of ways that the system is just firmly rooted in this old model of, “You’re broken, and I am here to fix you” and moving away from that model.*

-State Key Informant



*So we’ve talked about stigma a few times. Well, quite a few times, our group. And with the parents and with home visiting staff. And I know it means something a little bit different to everyone, but some of the overall discussions that we have had, CPS has been brought up a lot. That there is sometimes confusion between CPS and home visiting. That home visiting services are only for single people, that home visiting services are only for people with low-income, that home visiting services are only for a certain demographic of people, or that it means that you’re not taking care of your child well, which we all know that is not the case.*

-Local Key Informant

# STATEWIDE PARENT LEADERSHIP IN HOME VISITING GROUP IMPACTS

One of the settings for facilitating parent leadership and systems change that was highlighted by key informants was the Statewide Parent Leadership in Home Visiting group. The Statewide Parent Leadership in Home Visiting Group is unique within the parent leadership system in Michigan. It brings together parent leaders from across the state who are leaders within their home visiting Local Leadership Group for peer learning and cross-community collaboration. In order to illustrate the relationship between parent leadership systems building and outcomes for parent leaders, key informants were asked about their knowledge of the group and the impacts that they feel the group has on parent leadership in Michigan. All state and local key informants were aware of the group and they described several of the ways they believe it has impacted parent leaders, as summarized in Exhibit 7.

*Exhibit 7. Impacts of the Statewide Parent Leaders in Home Visiting Group according to Key Informants.*



**INCREASES COLLABORATION**  
among communities across Michigan



**FOSTERS MORE LEADERSHIP**  
and professional opportunities for parents



**SERVES AS AN ADVISORY GROUP**  
for early childhood professionals to seek feedback



**VALIDATES THE IMPORTANT ROLE**  
of parent leadership in Michigan

# CONCLUSIONS

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The eleven interviews with local and state key informants provided many insights into the origin of the parent leadership system in Michigan, how the system has evolved, and how it needs to continue to evolve.

The origins of Michigan's parent leadership system are connected to a number of very active individuals who were passionate about including parent voice in systems, with many having experienced early childhood service systems as parents themselves. This early guard of leaders had the privilege, time, and resources to dedicate to working on setting up a system for parent leadership. Many of these individuals also were educated professionals and brought a variety of systems skills and knowledge to the table, which was important in addressing the many challenges in setting new systems up to support parent leadership.

The first evolution of parent leadership led to many of these individuals getting the attention of state leadership and agencies through their advocacy efforts and led to many climbing the ranks within the systems themselves. These individuals were able to use their positions to further build a system to support parent leadership in many ways: by writing parent leadership into already existing grants and programs for funding sources, developing and implementing policies and practices to support parent engagement, developing parent leadership trainings and groups, bringing parents to sit at various systems tables, and identifying new partners and individuals to be involved in the movement. The system has been successfully building over time, with one initiative planting a seed that has continued to spread across the early childhood system.

The next evolution of parent leadership led to increased recognition around the need for equity in the parents who were at the tables and the voices that were being heard. It was recognized that parents that represented the communities that were being served were missing and were the most important voices to be heard in creating systems changes. The COVID-19 pandemic shift to virtual engagement proved a success in expanding representation at the table but led to challenges in building authentic relationships. Looking at ways to successfully build relationships and address conflict through virtual engagement may be a pathway to establishing safe and trusting environments and expanding parents and diversity at the table. There was also recognition amongst the "old guard" of leaders that had established the system that the "torch" needed to be passed onto a new generation of leaders, to infuse fresh ideas and energy into the system. At the same time, the "old guard" needed to share their institutional knowledge with new systems leaders to continue to grow the system.

It also came to be recognized that while scaling of the parent leadership system had had many successes, that in many ways the system had grown beyond its capacity to support parent leaders, particularly in helping parents move up the leadership ladder (i.e., into professional positions) and providing more individualized supports to parents. Sustainability of the system needed to focus on expanding resources for parent leadership, hiring more staff to support systems activities and parents, adapting training and materials with lessons learned, having more individualized supports for parents, and creating a pathway for parents to continue to grow as leaders and move up the leadership ladder.

The idea of “vertical” collaboration between grassroots activities and state level activities and “horizontal” collaboration to address siloes across departments, agencies, and disciplines are both important in sustaining and expanding parent leadership throughout Michigan. Conversations need to occur between the state and community at the same time as they are occurring across departments and agencies to foster connections and relationships on shared goals, to facilitate resource and funding building to continue to support and grow the system, and to share lessons learned to continue to strengthen the system.

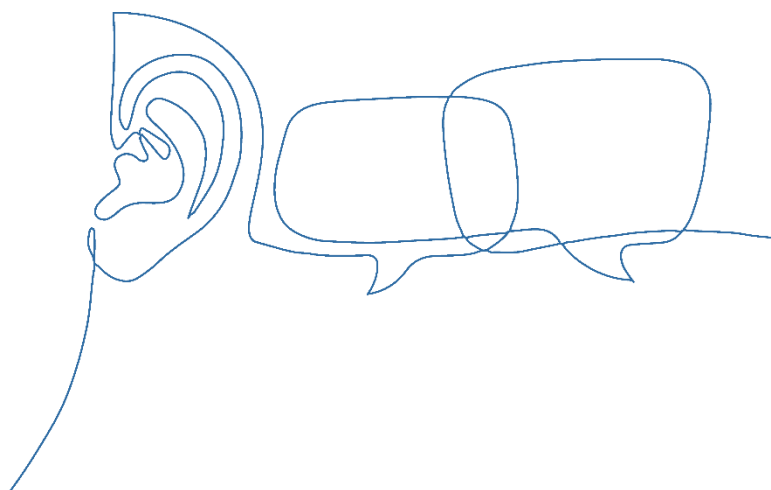
Systems changes were discussed in three phases: the initial creation of a parent leadership system, improvement and strengthening of the parent leadership system, and the impact that parent leaders ultimately have on the broader early childhood service system. Parent leaders are now sitting at many tables, and some headway on changing professional mindsets has occurred, but there is still more work to be done to prepare professionals for working with parents and authentically accepting them as equals. However, there were many examples of parent voice having a positive impact on early childhood service delivery that impacts many of Michigan’s families.



# LIMITATIONS

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There are several limitations to this study. There was a much higher representation of state key informants than local key informants, skewing the experiences and perspectives to be more from a top-down lens. Engaging more local key informants may have given richer detail from a bottom-up perspective. This may have also led to limited geographically local perspectives on the development of parent leadership. This report also reflects relatively few individuals in key positions within the early childhood system. Future work might explore professional experiences with parent leadership more broadly, including home visitors and other direct service providers. Additional work on understanding what the development of Michigan's parent leadership system looked like in communities across Michigan would help to understand geographically unique perspectives, facilitators, and challenges.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We would like to thank the key informants who engaged in this project to document and understand the parent leadership in early childhood system in Michigan.

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# APPENDICES

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## PARENT LEADERSHIP IN HOME VISITING KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

STATE LEAD INTERVIEW SCRIPT

LOCAL LEAD INTERVIEW SCRIPT

# STATE LEAD INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview today. Your feedback will help state leaders understand what it takes to support parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems.

This conversation will take between 60 and 90 minutes. Remember, you do not have to answer questions that you don't want to and you can stop our conversation at any time. Do you have any questions for me about our conversation today?

Before we get started with the questions, I wanted to confirm that you are okay with this call being audio recorded. [If Interviewee says yes, begin the recording. If no, explain the interview may take longer to capture full notes].

[If yes] I will start the recording now.

With our first set of questions, we are interested in learning more about your role and involvement in Michigan's home visiting, early childhood and parent leadership systems.

1. What is your role in the state home visiting and/or early childhood system?
2. In what ways have you been involved in parent leadership in home visiting or early childhood in Michigan?
3. Describe when you first remember understanding that parents have a role in the home visiting and early childhood system. In other words, when did you come to understand the concept of parent leadership?

With our next set of questions, we want to better understand why and how a system of parent leadership was created in Michigan and what things impacted the design and implementation of that system.

4. From your perspective, what sparked parent leadership initiatives in Michigan, in home visiting or beyond?
5. How did those efforts grow or change over time?
6. Who were/are the key people involved in home visiting or early childhood parent leadership efforts throughout Michigan?
7. Thinking about [KI's main Parent Leadership initiative], what was it like to incorporate parent leadership within that group? This could include things such as funding, facilitation, members, etc. What helped? What stood in the way?



If the Statewide Parent Leaders in Home Visiting group not yet mentioned...

8. Do you know about the Statewide Parent Leaders in Home Visiting group?
  - a. *If yes...* In what ways has it impacted parent leadership within your organization?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand the goals of parent leadership, what incorporating parent voice into home visiting and broader early childhood systems work has looked like in Michigan, and what supports parent leaders need from the state to be engaged.

9. What are the goals of parent leadership in Michigan's home visiting and early childhood systems?
  - a. What factors have moved the system toward this goal and what has stood in the way?
10. What are some of the successes and challenges you have experienced or observed in state efforts to incorporate parent voice in home visiting and early childhood work?
  - a. What lessons have you learned about incorporating parent voice into home visiting and early childhood work?
11. In your experience, what do parent leaders need to feel supported and engaged in [KI's initiative name]?
12. What do you think the role of a state leader should be in supporting parent leadership initiatives for home visiting and early childhood?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand what collaboration with other parent leadership initiatives and states looked like.

13. At any point did [KI's initiative] ever collaborate with other parent leadership efforts?
  - b. Which leadership efforts were collaborated with and what did that look like?
  - c. What did you learn from each other?
  - d. Is the collaboration still happening?
14. Did you ever collaborate with colleagues in other states about parent leadership efforts?
  - a. Which states were collaborated with and what did that look like?
  - b. What did you learn from each other?
  - c. Is the collaboration still happening?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand how different parts of the early childhood system observe and learn from each other to make changes to parent leadership efforts?

15. In what ways has parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems developed at the grassroots or local level in Michigan?

16. In what ways has parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems developed from the top—as a statewide initiative?
17. How do state and local systems learn from each other about incorporating parent voice in home visiting and early childhood systems?

With our last set of questions, we want to understand what types of systems change are necessary to incorporate parent voice into home visiting and early childhood systems. We are defining systems changes in a couple of ways. These might be structural—the practices and policies of a group; relational—who is in the group and who holds power; and/or transformative—thinking about a problem or issue in a new way. Let's explore the idea that hearing input from parents both requires systems changes and results in systems changes.

18. What had to change in how the state home visiting and early childhood system operated to make room for parent experience and voice?
  - a. Where within the state system did these changes occur? (policies, practices, relationships, power dynamics, ways of thinking, etc.)
  - b. What did that/those change(s) look like?
  - c. What changes are still needed?
19. Describe for me how involving parent leaders has changed how the home visiting and early childhood system operates in Michigan.
  - a. Where in the system have these changes occurred? (policies, practices, relationships, power dynamics, ways of thinking, etc.)
  - b. What have that/those change(s) look like?

Those are all of my questions! Do you have anything you would like to add about parent leadership that you feel we didn't cover today?

# LOCAL LEAD INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview today. Your feedback will help state leaders understand what it takes to support parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems.

This conversation will take between 60 and 90 minutes. Remember, you do not have to answer questions that you don't want to and you can stop our conversation at any time. Do you have any questions for me about our conversation today?

Before we get started with the questions, I wanted to confirm that you are okay with this call being recorded. *[If Interviewee says yes, begin the recording. If no, explain the interview may take longer to capture full notes].*

*[If yes]* I will start the recording now.

With our first set of questions, we are interested in learning more about your role and involvement in your community's home visiting, early childhood and parent leadership systems.

1. What is your role in the local home visiting and/or early childhood system?
2. In what ways have you been involved in parent leadership in home visiting or early childhood in your region?
3. Describe when you first remember understanding that parents have a role in the home visiting and early childhood system. In other words, when did you come to understand the concept of parent leadership?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand the goals of parent leadership in your region and what the role of local leaders should be in supporting parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems.

4. What are the goals of parent leadership in your region's home visiting and early childhood systems?
  - a. What factors have moved the system toward this goal and what has stood in the way?
5. What do you think the role of a local leader should be in supporting home visiting and early childhood parent leadership initiatives?
6. Thinking about [KI's main Parent Leadership initiative], what was it like to incorporate parent leadership within that group? This could include things such as funding, facilitation, members, etc. What helped? What stood in the way?

If the Statewide Parent Leaders in Home Visiting group not yet mentioned...

7. Do you know about the Statewide Parent Leaders in Home Visiting group?
  - a. *If yes...* In what ways has it impacted parent leadership within your organization?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand how home visiting and early childhood parent leaders are identified from their community, what incorporating parent voice into home visiting and early childhood systems work has looked like at the local level, and what it takes to support parent leaders at the local level.

8. Describe how you find parent leaders from your community to work in the home visiting and early childhood system.
9. What are some of the successes and challenges you have experienced or observed in local efforts to incorporate parent voice into home visiting and early childhood work?
  - a. What lessons have you learned about incorporating parent voice into home visiting and early childhood work at the local level?
10. In your experience, what do parent leaders need to feel supported and engaged in [KI's initiative name]?
11. In your experience, how do local organizations support home visiting and early childhood parent leaders in their work?

With our next set of questions, we want to understand what power dynamics are at play as parents who were clients receiving services become partners in home visiting and early childhood systems work.

12. Many times, the parents who know the most about home visiting and early childhood systems and services are current or former clients. How do you transition families into a leadership role within your organization?
  - a. Describe some of the interpersonal dynamics you've experienced or observed when parent leaders and professionals work together.

With our next set of questions, we want to understand how different parts of the early childhood system observe and learn from each other to make changes to parent leadership efforts?

13. In what ways has parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems developed at the grassroots or local level in Michigan?
14. In what ways has parent leadership in home visiting and early childhood systems developed from the top—as a statewide initiative?

15. How do state and local systems learn from each other about incorporating parent voice in home visiting and early childhood systems?

With our last set of questions, we want to understand what types of systems change are necessary to incorporate parent voice into home visiting and early childhood systems. We are defining systems changes in a couple of ways. These might be structural—the practices and policies of a group; relational—who is in the group and who holds power; and/or transformative—thinking about a problem or issue in a new way. Let's explore the idea that hearing input from parents both requires systems changes and results in systems changes.

16. What had to change in how your community home visiting and early childhood systems operated to make room for parent experience and voice?
  - a. Where within the local system did these changes occur? (policies, practices, relationships, power dynamics, ways of thinking, etc.)
  - b. What did that/those change(s) look like?
  - c. What changes are still needed?
17. Describe for me how involving parent leaders has changed how the home visiting and early childhood system operates in your community.
  - a. Where in the system have these changes occurred? (policies, practices, relationships, power dynamics, ways of thinking, etc.)
  - b. What have that/those change(s) look like?

Those are all of my questions! Do you have anything you would like to add about parent leadership that you feel we didn't cover today?