



Parent Leadership and Systems Change

Parent leadership occurs when parents gain the knowledge and skills they need to function in meaningful leadership roles and represent the “parent voice” to help shape the direction of programs, policies, and laws. Historically, parents of children with special needs have taken on leadership roles in advocating for supports and services for their children. Many parent leaders started out trying to improve the quality of life for a family member but ended up improving the lives of many through their advocacy efforts.

A parent leader speaks and acts from their perspective as a parent and the stories they hear from other parents. They become strong advocates for themselves, their children, and other families in their community, region, or state. Successful parent leaders often engage in shared leadership initiatives where parents and professionals build effective partnerships and share responsibility, expertise, and leadership in decisions being made that affect families, communities, and systems change.

Here are some tips to help you become an effective parent leader in bringing about change in policies, programs, or systems that impact families.

Avoid becoming overcommitted. Know the limits on your time and resources.

- Attend PACER Center workshops and leadership trainings, which are designed to accommodate most working parents’ schedules
- Network with other parents at PACER Center events and workshops to maximize support for and the efficacy of your efforts

Seek out other parents who support your cause and strategize on how to reach out to more parents

- Parents at your child’s school
- Social media

Identify organizations and groups that represent a similar viewpoint and could be potential partners in achieving your goal

- Parent organization in your child’s school
- Disability-specific organizations
- Special Education Advisory Council in your school district
- PACER Center advocates and parent leaders

Build an in-depth understanding of the issues involved with your cause

- Current laws or policies that will have an impact on achieving your goals for young children
- Budget implications

Identify the key people you need to reach with your message

- School board
- City or county board/commissioners
- MN State legislators

Develop key talking points about your issues that need to be communicated

- What is it you are trying to do?
- Why are you doing this?
- Who will be impacted if you achieve your goal?
- What will it take to achieve your goal?
- Discuss your talking points with PACER Center staff to clarify your approach and intended outcomes

Ask questions and speak out to have a powerful voice in decision-making about your issue or concern

- Gather all the information you can by doing research on your issue and talking with your professional partners and PACER Center staff
- Write letters to newspapers and identify key decision makers to connect with

Practice your skills in dealing with conflict.

- Stay calm
- Listen
- Seek to understand differing points of view

If you are successful, celebrate! If you want to continue making changes at the local level, review your message and strategies. Work with your partners to make any needed changes and keep track of all your supporters.

Remember a small group of parent leaders who are committed to changing practice, policy, systems or law can be successful in making change happen. Just look at the history of special education laws.

“We can change the world and make it a better place. It is in our hands to make a difference.”

Nelson Mandela