

FAMILY VOICE MATTERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE PARENT COALITIONS

Parent Leaders: Sheila Arias, Megan Koops-Fisher,
Salina Mann, Shelly Speck, Fredricka Tabor



To help Black, Native American, Latiné, and other families marginalized by decades of structural and institutional racism thrive, their perspectives must be at the center of decision making. Parent coalitions provide one platform from which they can provide input. BUILD recently interviewed five parent leaders about their experience in parent coalitions. In addition to reminding us of the need to address **implicit bias** on behalf of all families and children, they provided their thoughts on ways to ensure the coalitions fulfill their purpose and best meet the needs of families, and whether there's room for improvement in the way they function. Here's what they told us.

FAMILIES MUST NOT BE LEFT OUT OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Across the board, the parent leaders said that their voices must be systematically included when choices affecting their families are being made. Koops-Fisher said, "Families are the ones who are going to live with particular decisions, and they are the ones who know what is going on in their life." Speck put it this way: "Our coalition intends to reach out and help families and moms in maternal care. So, wouldn't it make sense to hear from the people that you're trying to help? To me, this is a no-brainer. It's like having politicians in office who aren't listening to their constituents at the same time they're making laws that affect them. If you don't include families in the process, you don't know if what you've put in place is doing what it's supposed to be doing, or even what's needed."



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Mann said that just one positive outcome of including parents in decision making is that it empowers them. "I've learned a ton from being asked to be involved at this level. It's made me a better parent. It's very good for parents because it keeps them very current. It's also great because you get to be around other moms doing really hard things and it gives them a lot of support that they're not always able to get other in arenas." Tabor added, "Through my experience being a part of the decision making by sharing my personal experiences as I provide testimony with legislators, I've learned that there is power in parents' voices; when a parent shares their story, they not only move the room, they shine a light on the resiliency within families and communities so that decision makers don't lose sight of their mission."

HOW COALITIONS SHOULD ENGAGE PARENTS

Some of the interviewees spoke about the challenge of bringing parents onto the coalitions as "bridging a gap" between those parents and the coalition members. Some suggested offering child care stipends, gift cards, and free items such as diapers and coupons for formula "to get them in the door." Others, like Arias, noted that

coalitions should take advantage of the fact that parents talk to each other: “When something works amazingly well, or doesn’t, such as a particular daycare or child care arrangement, parents will share that information [either by word of mouth or] on social media.” When members share their coalition experiences in this same manner, other parents become interested in participating. Parents have also been drawn in by posters displayed in places throughout the community, faith-based outreach, and family and community events, such as **Strolling Thunder**.



KEEPING THEM ENGAGED

It’s one thing to get parents to attend the first meeting but it’s another to keep them coming back. Koops-Fisher said it’s important that there be a structure in place, with clearly stated goals, adding that includes having “someone dedicated to relationship management.” She also suggested having a “buddy system,” whereby a veteran parent coalition member advises a new attendee on what to expect and the norms of engagement. She said it’s important to connect both before and after a meeting to ask, “What’d you think? How are you feeling?” and to ensure the other parents can ask clarifying questions about topics that will be discussed. This allows parents to start developing mutual trust and the sense that you are their champion, both of which are key to parents’ long-term engagement.

Arias added that having a parent facilitate a coalition can help avoid other parents feeling intimidated by jargon they may not be familiar with or by the fact that English is not their first language. The whole point is for parents to feel comfortable sharing their stories regardless of whether they are fluent in English or have a college degree. Above all, whoever the facilitator is, they must be inclusive and “look like” the members of the coalition.

Speck said being invited to attend a meeting in Chicago funded by Pritzker Children’s Initiative allowed her to meet other parents from other states that are engaging in this work. “That’s pretty important. I felt my concerns were valued. I made new friendships. I felt supported. It was an amazing experience for us to share concerns and bring them back to our coalitions and say, ‘This is what parents that are leading say they would like from you.’”

WHAT THE COALITIONS ARE DOING WELL

Koops-Fisher applauds the shift that has taken place in her coalition in the acknowledgment of parents as experts: “Companies don’t have a problem with bringing in a consultant to provide professional expert advice on a wide variety of topics, but so much of the time parent insight and expertise are not viewed in the same light, and they often are asked to provide advice without compensation. I can’t always just give feedback out of the goodness of my heart because I still have to pay for child care. I have to pay my mortgage.”

Arias noted the importance of bringing parents to the table and said that her coalition excels at providing “opportunities throughout the meetings to ask, ‘Who are we missing? Who do we need to invite?’”

Mann said that her coalition is strong thanks to “our cross-sector work.” Interacting across sectors keeps the coalition “tightknit and successful. It has helped to keep everybody in the loop that wants to be, keep them excited about the work, and make them comfortable with advocating and bringing in other parents. Watching the coalition grow is a team effort—it’s a team flowerpot that we’re all watering at the same time.”

Tabor commended her coalition on its work with lawmakers and legislative efforts in support of mental health and early intervention. “Living in a conservative state, it can feel like a slow process. However, our

coalition members are well-versed because the stakeholders are involved; they train our focus on tangible and measurable goals as a coalition. It's not always easy to hear what we can't do because as a parent, I want to fix it. I've learned to trust the process, that sometimes slow and steady wins the race, and that it can feel really good, especially when all stakeholders are on board."



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CONCERNS ABOUT CURRENT EFFORTS

Leadership does not come naturally to everyone. Arias said that "If leadership is the expectation, you have to train your parent leaders in how to lead and engage others." Tabor added that "training and mentorship," such as the type she experienced at **COFI**, helps to give parents a sense of structure, clarity about their roles and involvement, and instruction on "ensuring inclusivity as we continue to grow the coalition." According to Mann, "It's important for parent leaders to have national peer-to-peer support and mentoring to help strengthen the initiatives that they are asked to be involved in."

Arias pointed out that it's a challenge to "address a group that has so many different needs. Sometimes it's frustrating because you always have to be respectful. You have to let parents tell their stories and you must not minimize anyone's experience. You have to create a safe space even if it's virtual."

On the topic of so many online meetings, Arias added that while there's an upside to meeting virtually, e.g., "not having to spend money on gas or stressing about child care," there's a downside too: "You lose a little bit of connection." Koops-Fisher added, "As we move beyond the pandemic, there's something to be said about spending time in a space with someone in person."

Tabor stressed the importance of everyone feeling included, which includes ensuring a coalition's leadership looks like its members. She said that leaders should "address their own biases and interpretations of what their experiences and expectations are as they are made evident. Being open and honest is key to supporting understanding of cultural backgrounds and growth as a unified coalition."

Meetings should not be isolated events, but part of an ongoing feedback loop. Tabor said she often doesn't hear from other parents in her coalition in between monthly meetings. She suggested, "smaller meetings to follow up on things discussed at the monthly meeting." Speck added, "If you're trying to put a program in place to help families, but you don't have a feedback loop as far as what is working and what isn't, you're shooting in the dark." Koops-Fisher also made the point that feedback loops need to be ongoing because "...what I would've said five years ago [about my child's needs] versus now is not necessarily the same thing."

PLEASE HEAR US!

Parents are the experts on the programs and services their families need and they have a lot to say. Their input is essential. In addition, they need the support of other parents to remind them, as Mann said, "You may pull your hair out for the first couple years but then it's probably going to get a little bit better." Parent coalitions provide a forum that can serve both purposes. It's up to leadership to ensure all voices are not just included but heard.



SHEILA ARIAS, *THINK BABIES, NC*

Sheila is the NC Campaign Director at Mamás Con Poder, MomsRising. She is also a parent leader and trainer for the Division of Public Health, Children and Youth Branch, NC Department of Health and Human Services. Previously, Sheila worked at Durham Early Head Start and Children's Developmental Services. She was one of the seven finalists for the vacant Durham city council seat, one of the youngest cast members for the Listen to your Mother show, and a recipient of the 2015 Soroptimist Women's Opportunity Award. Sheila, who was born in Mexico and came to the US at the age of 12, is a mother of two. She became a voice for children and families after one of her children was born with a unique birth defect and special needs.



MEGAN KOOPS-FISHER, *THINK BABIES, MI*

Megan is a Parent Leader on the Think Babies Michigan Coalition. She volunteers for NEA Big Read Lakeshore, a month-long, community-wide reading program, and works for a non-profit that helps children and families be ready for kindergarten. A mom of three wonderfully rambunctious young children living in West Michigan, she and her family enjoy taking advantage of Lake Michigan and the wonderful nature trails in the area.



SALINA MANN, *THINK BABIES, MI*

Salina currently serves as a Parent Leader for Think Babies Michigan (Wayne County). She was nominated to serve with other State Coalition Parent Leaders, as part of the Pritzker Children's Initiative. Salina serves as a Parent Representative for the MICC, MiDEC, and MiPAAC and is also a K-5 English and ESL tutor. Residing in SE Michigan, she is a mom of two who enjoys the outdoors, reading, and cooking.



SHELLY SPECK, *CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY ALLIANCE, NV*

Shelly believes in an altruistic approach to advocacy and parent/family engagement through leadership development and community outreach. She maintains that legislative policies which shape children's outcomes should be equitable and led by families and those with lived experience. She joined the Children's Advocacy Alliance in 2022 after spending a year as a parent ambassador and leader on a state and national level. During that time, she provided testimony at the Nevada State Legislature to the Interim Finance Committee and propelled legislation relating to families experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, early intervention, child development and outcomes, and school curriculum and supports. Shelly is certified as a Community Health Worker and, in 2022, was appointed as a member to the State Special Education Advisory Committee/NV Department of Education. Shelly resides in Gardnerville, NV with her husband and seven-year-old child.



FREDRICKA TABOR, *SAVE THE CHILDREN, EXCEL BY EIGHT, AR*

Fredricka works as a mental health therapist at White River Health in Batesville, Arkansas. Previously, she served eight years in the United States Navy, working as a Machinist Mate. She enjoys advocating with her fellow parent advisors on the Excel By Eight Family Advisory Board, addressing community needs on the state and local level. She also has the privilege of ensuring family and parent voice is at the table as she works alongside other state coalitions at the national level through the efforts of the Pritzker Children's Initiative. Fredricka is a wife and mother of three little ones: Adriana, age 5; Julian, age 3; and Addison, who is one year old.