

# Parent Leadership and Voice in Michigan: An Evolving Commitment That Is Contingent on Trust and Humility

**National Home Visiting Network  
Network Principles in Action**

**OCTOBER 2020**

Since the 1980s, with advocates on the outside of state government and a few necessary champions strategically placed on the inside, there has been heightened awareness and efforts to incorporate parent leadership and voice in early childhood policies and programs in Michigan.

This began in earnest in the late 1980s with inclusion of parents in the design and implementation of the Children's Special Health Care Services (Title V) program and Early On, Michigan's Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act program. Then in the early 2000s, the state received the federal Early Childhood Comprehensive System (ECCS) grant and again parents and community leaders were included in the Great Start Collaborative bodies, helping to oversee the planning, implementation, and improvement at the local level. Evaluations of Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions found that as parents and professionals became more capable in communicating and collaborating, the local early childhood system became stronger.

Since 2012, parent leadership and voice has been an integral part of the state's implementation of the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV). Included in the Competitive grant was a commitment to investing in the development of parent voice as a core component of the MIECHV program and related systems building. Now, the contract for each MIECHV local implementing agency (LIA) specifically requires parent representation in the continuous quality improvement efforts.

The evolution of parent leadership and voice has not been linear; commitment ebbed and flowed over the years, causing efforts to start and stop, often compromising momentum. For example, the Parent Leadership Program (PLP) -- a component of Early On -- trained over 700 families over nine years and then funding ended. Fortunately, representatives from the Michigan Departments of Education, Community Health, and Human Services committed funds to support a next iteration, Parent Leadership in State Government (PLISG). They intentionally created PLISG with multiple funding streams to avoid the dependence on just one source, as was the case with the PLP. This approach worked and the PLISG is now in its 15th year.

The ability to create and sustain family leadership efforts depends in large part on the commitment of the decisionmakers within government. In the home visiting space, Nancy Peeler, Manager of the Early Childhood Health Section of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, participated in the original PLP and carried that experience with her. “Nancy and other parents like her who participated in the program became the voice inside government that said we need to sustain and fund this so that we have a pipeline for parent leaders. They knew the importance of parent leadership training opportunities because they had benefited directly,” said Bryn Fortune, Family and Parent Leadership Director, Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC).

Even when state leadership supports the idea of having parents at the table, it does not mean that those parents will feel welcomed or that their voices will be heard. The state MIECHV program funds ECIC to help ready parents for participation through coaching, mentoring, and peer-to-peer support. ECIC also helps to ready tables at the local and state levels to be able to listen, trust, share power, and co-create with parents. The leaders at ECIC suggest that it takes time to build trust and to help all recognize that each person’s role matters. And it takes an extra dose of humility too.

---

*“Nancy and other parents like her who participated in the program became the voice inside government that said we need to sustain and fund this so that we have a pipeline for parent leaders. They knew the importance of parent leadership training opportunities because they had benefited directly.”*

---

Just as the professionals are compensated for their time, a statewide interagency policy and procedure, though not uniformly implemented, stipulates that parents should be reimbursed for their time, transportation, and child care costs.

Sarah Zybert -- mom of six-year-old Finley and now Director of Advocacy and Advancement at Voices for Children Advocacy Center in Flint, MI -- remembers clearly the first time she connected with her home visiting program. “A month after moving eight hours away from my family, I found out I was pregnant. I never planned to be a parent and didn’t know what to do,” said Zybert. A flyer on the bulletin board at the health department offered help. Zybert called and immediately felt supported by the warm and caring voice on the other end of the phone. Initially reluctant to have a home visitor in her sparsely furnished home, she realized she needed the help. Soon after, she had her first visit from a Nurse-Family Partnership home visitor and she was overcome with the encouragement and support. “The home visitor was there for me. She answered all of my questions about the pregnancy and preparing to be a mother, and when I started getting shut-off notices the program helped me connect to resources,” said Zybert. During one visit, the home visitor invited Zybert to attend the

state's home visiting conference. It was there that she first met Peeler who with open arms welcomed her into the hotel and walked her to a room with other parents and Fortune. "I felt so supported. From this, I became involved with the Home Visiting Local Leadership Group (LLG). While sitting around that table with professionals, and sharing my experiences, I realized doors were beginning to open and I was beginning to find my voice. I went from \$2 in the bank and no plan, to a job I love with benefits." Zyburt adds, "If you met me seven years ago you would not recognize me today. Sure I'm still shy and reserved. But back then I never spoke up, never wanted to stir the pot, and just flew under the radar. Only in having Finn and being involved with parent groups and LLG, I've found my voice as an advocate for my family." An early example of this was when Zyburt realized Finn's pediatrician was recommending things that were not right for her family. "I could not have spoken up and advocated for a change in doctors if it wasn't for the support of other parents who were at similar places on their own journeys. The quarterly meetings and having that support from my peers – I just don't know where else I could have found that."

---

*"If you met me seven years ago you would not recognize me today. . . Only in having Finn and being involved with parent groups and LLG, I've found my voice as an advocate for my family."*

---

While Zyburt's personal growth is admirable, the contributions she and other parents are making to shape and strengthen services for children and families is just as important. Zyburt reflects, "At the local level, we advocated to the mass transit system to change the location of a bus stop. The stop was in the vicinity of Hurley Children's Hospital and we were hearing from families that it was too far from the entrance they needed, especially in the winter. When we talked to MTA they said the stop was located for the convenience of the driver. We were able to advocate about the importance of the parents' needs for their children, and they ultimately made the change. Later, we heard from other families that a fare was not working. We went back to that same contact at MTA and explained what they were hearing and the challenges for families because of the fare."

Peeler points out that parents are having a profound impact at the state level as well. "Sarah and others have developed and delivered workshops at our state home visiting conference, and were the keynote one year. These are among the most popular workshops every year."

Like Fortune and Peeler and many others who participated in parent leadership programs when their children were young and now have positions in state government or supporting programming for children and families, so too will Zyburt and many within her cohort of parents. It's unclear if commitment to parent leadership and voice is held at the most senior levels of government, or if it is valued and quietly supported by middle-level managers like Peeler instead. "I'd say there is not an

agency-wide commitment to parent voice. Right now, it's more of a buck shot approach," said Fortune. But this may change as states begin to look at equity with more intention and recognize the necessity of parent voice in shaping more equitable approaches.

Michigan's efforts to lift-up parent leadership and voice align with networking principles in the following ways:

- **Mission, Not Organization:** Families in Michigan come to these conversations from a place of mission. They walk this principle.
- **Trust, Not Control:** There is a hidden fear that parents will come to the table and ask for things unattainable. It's essential that folks let go of control in order to truly listen and understand the parents' experiences, strengths, and needs.
- **Humility, Not Brand:** Humility is a fundamental principle to bring parent leadership alive. But this is often a place where well-intentioned people become fearful.
- **Node, Not Hub:** Parent leadership work is about helping everyone understand that parents are an essential node and need to be included as co-creators in the planning, decision-making, and evaluation design of programs that benefit children and their families.

---

*Written by: Deborah Roderick Stark, National Home Visiting Network*

*Based on interviews and written communication with Nancy Peeler, Manager of the Early Childhood Health Section of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and interviews with Sarah Zyburt, Director of Advocacy and Advancement at Voices for Children Advocacy Center in Flint, MI, and Bryn Fortune, Family and Parent Leadership Director of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation. Fortune has walked alongside hundreds of parent leaders in Michigan over the past three decades and shares from that collective experience.*