

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN



"But I'm Just a Parent"

Parent Leadership Is About Democracy

Elaine Zimmerman

There is a critical gap between parental desire to improve conditions for children and capacity. The lack of skills is not from disinterest but from a missing tool kit, a democracy tool kit that might offer the specific skills of how to create change in policy and leadership within a civic context. When the tools of democracy are understood, parents will enter civic life.

Parents are worried. They worry about who will take care of their children while they work. They worry over lost time, missed opportunities with their children, working one, two and sometimes three shifts to make a decent family wage.

Parents know the new economy requires new skills of their children. They often fear their children will not have a fair chance in the public schools. They know that gangs and drugs can compete with the family for children. They know that in some neighborhoods safety trumps all other cards for their young children.

As leaders in public policy, it is our responsibility to reach parents and to help them reach us. Yet, it is not uncommon to hear providers complain that parents did not attend meetings that were paramount to family policy or education goals.

Parents no longer have the civic skills necessary to connect with government. Without the tools, they do not engage. This is not disinterest, it is lack of vehicle. Parents need dignity, access, social context, substantive roles and a clear map of goals and child outcomes.

The frequent line, "But I'm just a parent," is often heard at meetings when parents are asked their opinions on a policy matter. The underpinning meaning is, "How can you ask me what I think? I am just a mother or father. I have no public opinions." This sentence is the emblem of marginalization. It infers that parents are not a constituency and do not perceive themselves as civic consumers.

As language often teaches about culture, the sentence "But I'm just a parent," may tell us both about parent perception and self regard within a civic framework as well as where many within a social policy have allowed parents to sit. The conundrum is basic. Parents are less involved because they are expected to be less involved.

Parent involvement in civic discourse is frequently a one-time event and often unintentionally token. People are concerned about engaging parents when they need parents as a constituency to effect a specific policy change.

Increasingly federal legislation requires parent participation. Head Start, Even Start, Title One, and other federal policies for young children position parents to be involved. These fine policy expectations of family involvement and parental decision-making are starting to be required in other policy domains. Federal as well as state law increasingly now require parents in the mix.

But the depth of parent involvement in programs such as Head Start is not always replicated in other programs. Most national work that is considered parent leadership is strictly parent education. When we minimize parenting to "just a parent" and teach improved parenting as the bridge to leadership, we are confusing service with civics. They are not at all the same.

Sometimes parents are placed on boards to offer input. Usually there is only one parent and this parent is symbolic of the consumer. The parent comes infrequently and this becomes the measure of parent disinterest in the issue. Board meetings are indeed important in that they determine the policy direction and overall goals of an institution. However, if the parent is not taught how a board works, how to behave within a board context, what public policy is, how it is created, the parent will not come with bounding enthusiasm or offer ideas.

Parents need to be treated as equal stakeholders in a public problem regarding family concerns. If not, the parent will usually feel quietly incompetent with few attachments to civic participation. Civics can no longer be presumed to be taught in the schools, religious institutions or public arenas where parents meet.

What was once a high expectation of government and the public good, with clear understanding of how to interface with civic leaders, is now a low expectation with meager civic engagement. Too many parents are distanced from social change. They do not know how to effect the changes they deeply wish for their children and other children within neighborhoods, schools and communities.

Often parental desire for change is strong while the capacity to make change is modest. Parents need to learn how to lead. The outcomes of helping parents learn how to analyze civic issues, how to ask the right question, how to speak publicly, are incrementally large. Skills learned can be replicated in many settings. Parents acquire hope, empowerment and the democracy skills necessary to enter public life for the next generation.

Children watch their parents changing social and educational landscapes. Expectations of improvement are contagious. It is this hope that offers children a deep and acquired sense that they can lead outside their homes in constructive and creative ways. Children begin to expect to visit city and town buildings of importance. They are comfortable going with their parents to meetings. They begin to watch the news with their parents. The outside

world pours in with meaning, opportunity and the expectation that each generation will make our world better.

Specific democracy tools that are essential for parent leadership include:

- How government works;
- What public policy is;
- Understanding budgets and resource allocations;
- The role of different constituencies in making change for children;
- Ways to reach local, state and elected leaders;
- Voting, and why it matters;
- How to use oneself as messenger in public dialogue;
- How to lead group discussions and cull ideas;
- How to work with diversity in community;
- Ways to empower community and see neighborhood and groups as assets.

Parents also benefit from assessing their personal biases towards public life, power and change. If one has had difficult experiences at home or in public with authority or with bias, one's faith in civic involvement is often dimmed. Leadership is impeded by many parent advocates when experiences with authority have influenced their sense of leadership as dangerous or abusive. These experiences are helpful to understand in order to facilitate constructive, parent engagement.

Connecticut's Parent Leadership Training Institute curriculum seeks to teach these skills and address these obstacles. The Right Question Project in Boston helps families ask questions to get at data, cause, context and action. Opening Doors in Los Angeles helps Spanish-speaking families learn to lead. The Pritchard Curriculum in Kentucky and the Parents Supporting Educational Excellence in Connecticut both forward parent leadership specifically in schools around educational gains and outcomes.

Such initiatives need to grow so more and more families can become substantively engaged in the public good for children. They all masterfully increase family civics. Democracy programs for families create the enthusiasm that Walt Whitman spoke of when he wrote, "I Hear America Singing." Without democracy skills, there is a quiet whine and disappointment has opportunity to abound. When the tool kit is full of civic expectation, there is the hammer, the drill, the song.