



# *Parent Leadership Training Institute*

*of Alexandria*

*A Connecticut Commission on Children Civic Leadership Initiative*

*In partnership with the City of Alexandria and Hopkins House*

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# Parent Leadership Training Institute

## History

In 1992, The Connecticut Commission on Children worked collaboratively with the American Leadership Forum and Leadership Greater Hartford to design the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) as a result of information garnered from statewide parent focus groups.

In 2004, the need for a program enhancing parental leadership skills for effective children's advocacy was recognized in Alexandria. Efforts establishing a successful training program suiting our local needs began. After much consideration, Alexandrians chose to participate in the expanding Parent Leadership Training Institute.

## Mission Statement

The Parent Leadership Training Institute prepares parents to become leading advocates for children. Parents' opinions are often unheard. Although parents may lack advocacy skills, their strong motivation and will to change their children's lives is apparent. The PLTI teaches parents, who wish to improve the lifelong health, safety and learning of children, how to become practiced change agents for the next generation.

Parents define the curriculum and participate in its evaluation and outcomes. Family supports, such as child care, are included. Each class of parents mentors the next class, creating a pyramid effect of community caring and developing a coalition of parent leaders.

## *The Core Learning of Parent Leadership*

- **Work with diversity;**
- **Define needs;**
- **Assess and define problems;**
- **Speak publicly;**
- **Utilize the media;**
- **Review child and family data;**
- **Evaluate a program;**
- **Understand personal history and its impact on self image and empowerment;**
- **Form useful coalitions;**
- **Collect and utilize data;**
- **Reach successful outcomes;**
- **Become familiar with state and federal law;**
- **Understand ordinances;**
- **Strategize for action;**
- **Plan for whole agendas using a step-by-step process.**

## PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE CURRICULUM

### **Retreat: Creating a Caring Community for Children**

Discuss issues affecting children and milestones in child and family development.

GOAL: To develop a parent group and understanding of when and how a community cares for children.

### **Class 1: Thriving with Diversity in the Group Process**

What do we look like now? What will Americans look like in the future?  
What are the strengths of separateness and integration?

GOAL: To acquire knowledge regarding diversity, ethnic, class and race differences.

### **Class 2: The Change Process**

Look at change within our own experience, focusing on the tools we can use to change our environment.

GOAL: To understand what creates change within self, family and community.

### **Class 3: Parents as Change Agents:**

How do our own experiences in family life influence our notion of the right to be a parent leader? What is our own self-image?

GOAL: To help parents perceive themselves as change agents and to understand obstacles to leadership.

### **Class 4: How to Define a Problem and Work Toward a Solution**

A look at community needs from the parent perspective.

GOAL: To begin working through problems with developed strategy and conflict resolution skills.

### **Class 5: The Intentional Use of Language**

What are forms of communication, and why do they matter? Focus on active listening and constructive ways to make a point.

GOAL: To understand the importance of using language to create a framework and express viewpoints.

### **Class 6: Learning How a Community Works**

How to use and maximize community resources. Who has the resource information?  
How do community meetings work?

GOAL: To begin mapping communities with increased understanding of assets, resources and communication flow.

**Class 7: How Local Systems Work and How to Interact With Them**  
Who makes the decisions in the city, in the schools, at the library?  
How do policies develop?

GOAL: To increase awareness of the structure of local institutions and systems through attention to budget, policy and communication.

**Class 8: Networks**  
How to think about who should become part of the change effort. How to expand your partners.

GOAL: To further access goals for children and enable partners to reach goals.

**Class 9: The Power of the Media and How to Use it**  
How to use television, radio and print media. Parents as messengers for children.

GOAL: To increase understanding of print and electronic media, how it works and how to access it.

**Class 10: Using Your Voice**  
How to speak publicly. How to present public statements with success.

GOAL: To bolster confidence, self awareness and the impact of self presentation.

**Class 11: The Life Cycle of the Child and the Functions of the Family**  
How does the life cycle of the child intersect with the life cycle of the family and family functions?

GOAL: To attain a beginning understanding of family function, family structure, and child development.

**Class 12: Social and Economic Trends Affecting Children and Families**  
How to understand the demographic, economic and social trends. A look at the life cycle of the child and the functions of the family. What are the assets and needs of children and families in our region?

GOAL: To understand the social, economic and demographic factors affecting child health, learning, safety and care-giving.

**Class 13: What is Public Policy?**  
A look at the role of government in democracy, the meaning of policy, types of policy, and how policy happens.

GOAL: To understand public policy as a vehicle for democracy, citizen input, and change for children.

**Class 14: How the State Works**

A look at state government – structure, communications, resources, policy impact, and governance.

GOAL: To understand how government can be utilized by citizens to affect dialogue and change for the public good.

**Class 15: How a City Works**

A look at town and city structures, policies, and resources.

GOAL: To understand how parents can interact with elected officials, city departments, and school boards to communicate and affect change for the public good.

**Class 16: How we Understand the Law**

An overview of children’s law to assess the impact of state and federal code in protecting and enhancing the lives of children.

GOAL: To demystify law with increased comfort reading children’s law.

**Class 17: Budgets – From Wallets to State – It’s all Money and Priorities**

An introduction to budget design and analysis within state, city, and schools.

GOAL: To increase comfort level with fiscal analysis of children’s policy and programs.

**Class 18: Evaluation, Outcomes and Accountability**

An overview of goals in policy and a program to improve outcomes and public accountability.

What is an outcome measure, a benchmark, a social health index?

GOAL: To gain a beginning understanding of benchmarks and evaluative longitudinal tools.

**Class 19: The Magic of the Unexpected: Forming New Alliances**

Forging new alliances and expanding partnerships to create substantive, broad impact for children.

GOAL: To increase understanding of the dynamics of policy change, coalition-building, and social climate.

**Class 20: Language: Packaging and Moving Agendas**

How to design initiatives: how to clarify goal, purpose, outcomes with vigor, art and impact.

GOAL: To improve understanding of media and language and its impact; and to recognize the connection between language and clarity of goal and constituency.

## **THE PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING INSTITUTE**

### ***Rationale:***

The Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) seeks to enable parents to become leading advocates for children. Parents' opinions are often unheard. They lack advocacy skills, but not the motivation or will to change their children's lives. The PLTI teaches parents how to become practiced change agents for the next generation. The Institute also works with programs and initiatives to facilitate attitudinal change towards parents and to help design systems reform for significant parental involvement.

### ***General Program and Purpose:***

The PLTI program is a two-generation strategy to bolster parental involvement while promoting the lifelong health, safety and learning of children. The program integrates child development leadership and democracy skills into a parent curriculum. Parents attend a 20-week program. The application process is competitive. Family supports such as child care, meals and transportation are provided. Each class mentors the next class, creating a pyramid effect of community caring and a developing coalition of parents. The classes are evaluated by parents for both short and long-term outcomes.

### ***What We Have Learned About Children's Learning:***

- The parent (family) is the first and most influential teacher.
- The home is where language begins and values are nurtured.
- The research establishes that parent engagement has a positive impact on students' academic achievement, behavior in school, and attitudes about school and work.
- When parents are involved at school, not just at home, children do better in school, they stay in school longer and they go to better schools.
- Families, schools, and community organizations all contribute to student achievement; the best result comes from all three working together. Schools that connect to their communities have higher achievement and graduation rates.
- Children learn best when their parents are able to play four key roles in their children's learning: Teachers (helping their children at home), supporters (contributing their skills to the school), advocates (helping children receive fair treatment), and decision-makers (participating in joint problem-solving at every level).

### ***Parents are offered three steps of training built on interactive adult learning practices:***

1. a retreat to develop group and define mission;
2. a 10-week course on parent leadership;
3. a 10-week civics program with a corresponding community project.

A graduation follows at where parents receive diplomas and public recognition. Graduates participate in an Alumni Program that offers support and critical thinking among parents for civic participation.

### ***Definition of Parent Leadership:***

For the PLTI, parent leadership means the capacity to interact within civic society with purpose and positive outcomes for children. The public is increasingly alienated from governance and democracy skills today. Many people do not know how society functions or how decisions are made within the public policy and budget domains. Yet, most parents are deeply concerned about the impact of school, community and the environment on their children.

### ***General Parent Leadership Training Institute Goals Seek to:***

1. Help parents become the leaders they would like to be for children;
2. Expand the capacity of parents as change agents for children;
3. Develop supportive communities of parents within targeted regions of the state that will support one another in both their skills development and successful parent action for young children;
4. Develop supportive communities of parents within parent-driven institutions such as Head Start and Title I programs;
5. Facilitate parents' capacity to offer input into community efforts on the neighborhood, city, regional and state level;
6. Facilitate systems change for parental involvement with increased utilization of parents in policy and process decisions; and
7. Increase parent-child interactions and quality children's programs through parent involvement.

### ***Who the Parents are:***

Parent participants represent the demographic profile of Alexandria. Their ages span from teen parents to grandparents raising grandchildren. They are single parents, stepparents, foster and adoptive parents, and others concerned about improving systems for children. Classes are comprised of 20-25 parents. There are occasional regional symposiums.

## *Parents as Beneficiaries*

There is no single or special interest policy agenda underlying the PLTI. The goal is to dignify the role of parents as change agents within community and government by building their capacity. Parents use the tools developed to address social policy issues of concern. Parents are taught the tenets of democracy and their rights to utilize government optimally in the best interest of children. Public policy, media and outreach are demystified and fully explained. The parents trained, their children and those touched by their growing leadership, are the beneficiaries.

## *Children as Beneficiaries*

Parent participation in children's issues bolsters parent-child relations and leads to positive outcomes. Parents feel stronger about their own capabilities as they develop leadership skills. This increased sense of self-regard rapidly improves parent-child communication. Children sense the potential to effect change in their own lives and other lives. Hope increases in a time of diminishing expectations. Children's readiness to learn increases as parents participate more in their lives, through language and expectation.

The tools of leadership among parents and community build opportunity for children. Parent participation in children's issues concretely improves children's programs within the Alexandria. As parents develop speaking and needs assessment skills, they are better able to articulate issues and guide solution-building. In Connecticut, graduates have facilitated the development or expansion of several programs ranging from children's libraries to preschool opportunities to programs for grandchildren being raised by grandparents.

## *Systems as Beneficiaries*

Similarly, institutions, through parent leadership training, improve their capacity to work with and empower parents. The PLTI has worked with early care and education programs, social services institutions and cities to improve: 1) parent involvement policies; 2) consumer-driven service delivery; and 3) leadership opportunities for parents. Frequently programs do not see how to involve parents. Training or parent leadership can offer a shift in attitude and arouse new interest in parent potential.

## HOW PLTI VALUES ARE REFLECTED IN STRUCTURE

### ***The PLTI is relational:***

The PLTI treats each parent with the depth of relationship that we expect of parent roles within family. Parent leadership does not emerge from slick curriculum, but from developed trust, substantive dialogue, skills building, hope and expectation. These ingredients offer parents, who seek to create change for their children and others, a ladder toward leadership.

### ***The PLTI is building community:***

Structurally, the PLTI selects each class as a community. Participants apply and receive a one hour interview. Each candidate enters on his or her own strength and special characteristics. Parents are selected for the class with consideration for how their participation will enhance the diversity, strength and learning for the group as a whole.

### ***The PLTI focuses both on content and process:***

The program curriculum relies on process, content and context. This form of analysis is part of each class, meeting or public engagement. Parents are routinely taught to analyze the event, the process and their situation within it. Personal history, self-assessment, systems analysis and social economic understanding are blended into each class.

### ***The PLTI is intergenerational:***

The PLTI offers leadership training to parents as well as grandparents. We recognize that multiple generations are presently raising children. The children attend dinner and participate in childcare while parents, grandparents, or other caretakers are in class. They are exposed to numerous policy debates, systems and structures of governance. The children become comfortable in City Hall, reading newspapers, and watching their parents speak. The graduation offers many children the chance to witness their parent, grandparent, or other caretaker graduate. This parent-child participation in leadership enhances the children's visions of their own potential to affect change.

### ***The PLTI creates a pyramid:***

Parent graduates serve as mentors for the next class of students as well as ad hoc parent programs on capacity-building. Parents attend graduation, facilitate retreats and offer program support to the next class. Parents participate, advise, speak and mentor other parents and programs seeking to work better with parents as consumers.

***The PLTI offers on-going support and technical assistance to parent leaders:***

The PLTI provides a part-time staff position to create the community of parents for each class. She selects each candidate. She assesses the strength of the group and works with the teacher in finalizing candidates selections. Between classes, she is the “glue person,” to address service needs, resources and strategy discussions between and among parents.

***The PLTI is parent-based rather than institution-based:***

Parents are accepted through their own application. Institutions do not apply or purchase slots for parents to be trained in single-issue agendas. The PLTI seeks to bolster a constituency of parents that can access and utilize both government and community agencies optimally for children.

***The PLTI offers on-going training for parent leaders:***

Parent graduates are invited to attend and speak at numerous policy and teaching engagements requested of the Parent Leadership Training Institute of Alexandria. The site offers a fertile training ground for parents interested in law, budget and public speaking. Connecticut Commission staff members may invite PLTI graduates to Washington to speak on capacity-building. These roles are then analyzed to deepen parents’ understanding and evaluation of presentation, communication and policy impact.

## RESEARCH ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

### *The Evidence of Need – Initial Research*

The PLTI two year research project found that parents, across race, gender, and class lines, are able to describe the needs of children and the obstacles to address them. Yet, they do not see themselves as capable of influencing change. The majority of parents do not know how to work within the city, school, or state system, nor do they believe they are entitled to do so.

### *There is a critical gap between need, desire and capacity to effect change.*

Testing the premises of parent leadership, the Commission on Children spoke with state and national parent leadership efforts to ascertain and ask: 1) What are the crucial variables to success? 2) What leads empowerment to be enduring? and 3) What are the significant processes to bring in parents?

The findings included the following:

### *Motivators leading parents to actively participate on behalf of their child(ren) are:*

- (1) Knowing that their participation is part of something successful;
- (2) Knowing that they can make a difference in their lives and the live of their children;
- (3) Feeling supported, respected and acknowledged for their time and efforts;
- (4) Receiving hands-on training and guidance; and
- (5) Receiving family supports such as food, child care, transportation, etc.

### *Maintaining involvement and empowerment within a parent group entails:*

- (1) Creating a space where parents feel safe, comfortable and valued;
- (2) Developing realistic and attainable expectations and goals;
- (3) Creating a sense of ownership in the change process;
- (4) Acknowledging efforts and inspiring next steps; and
- (5) Seeing the progress in parents' efforts.

***Structuring and building leadership in a program consists of:***

- (1) Working with parents in a non-patronizing, inclusive environment;
- (2) Establishing rapport with other “leaders”, e.g., local and state policy makers;
- (3) Holding trainings that can be easily applied to a variety of settings;
- (4) Establishing a peer network among the group and with community contacts;
- (5) Following up on actions that take place outside of the group;
- (6) Scheduling time for personal sharing and listening; and
- (7) Providing a network of mentors.

***Ensuring involvement of people on a local level includes:***

- (1) Demystifying the political process;
- (2) Making friends;
- (3) Creating a list of contacts;
- (4) Developing specific goals and tasks related to accomplishing a goal; and
- (5) Encouraging people to get out of “victim” or passive roles and into responsible action.

## OUTREACH LESSON LEARNED TO DATE

The PLTI has learned numerous lessons in planning, communicating and teaching with parents which include:

1. Listen to parents, base agendas and curriculum on parent-defined need and language;
2. Remove barriers to participation: offer diner, transportation and child care;
3. Avoid professional buzzwords such as “developmentally appropriate practice”;
4. Link participation to real change and policies that can be enacted;
5. Acknowledge the fact that we are all parents. Enter conversations based on personal family experiences rather than a separate vantage point. Parenting and the joy it brings can connect us;
6. Develop environments that value values. Parents care deeply about the decline of the social contract. They want vision and roots for their families. Family values are critical to parent involvement;
7. Do not fear religion. Religion can be a base from which organizing takes place. It can teach leadership skills;
8. Create a pyramid by having parents mentor parents or reach out to new parents in the next class;
9. Allow for the psyche. The family is a Rorschach test. If we want to create a safe and diverse community, we have to allow for the fear, ambivalence and judgment that may surface about family roles and expectations;
10. Include the fathers. There is an African story of a dead man whose bones come alive only when the newborn says, “Where is my father?” He comes alive through remembrance and expectation;
11. Let parents design goals for action, skills development and objectives for leadership. You can meaningfully focus on a small section or plan if you understand the whole canvas; and
12. Allow time for stories, generational history and dreams. Where there is memory, there is also hope.

Given the declining quality of life for children and families in America and the fragmentation of the social safety net, children’s advocates need to recognize the central role parents can play in addressing child and family concerns. Investing time and energy now in developing strong parent leaders will have a profound and lasting impact on the health and vitality of our communities.

## **CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY – SELECTING PARENT PARTICIPANTS**

Creating a community of parents is a rich undertaking. It takes time, care and attention because the heart of the work is relational.

### ***OUTREACH:***

#### **How do you Invite Parents to the Training?**

- Send a letter to different and diverse organizations;
- Create press releases for local newspapers;
- Utilize church and school leadership;
- Call the local radio stations;
- Use word of mouth; and
- Utilize graduates of the program to select new students.

#### ***Generate a community list of organizations and contacts from the following areas.***

- Community-based organizations that serve parents;
- Principals of public and private sectors;
- Area legislators;
- Clergy of churches and synagogues;
- Civic associations;
- Selected businesses;
- Parent-teacher associations;
- Child care centers;
- Family day care providers networks;
- Enterprise zones;
- Housing programs; and
- Resource and referral networks.

### ***Broadening the Field of Leaders:***

- Seek parents from different socio-economic backgrounds and City neighborhoods. Mix family structure as well as work experience. Select parents, grandparents, foster parents and adoptive parents;
- Seek parents who have potential to: 1) show leadership skills within the neighborhood, church or school in which their child resides; 2) may be timid, but seek to be part of the decisions and policies about their children and families; 3) have been socially or economically marginalized, but deeply wish to enter civic debate; and 4) are leading something already and would benefit by broadening or deepening their skills.

### ***THE INTERVIEW PROCESS:***

1. After receiving an application, applicants are called for interviews. If we do not hear from parents after two weeks, we call them;
2. When scheduling interviews, we remember how easily the plans of parents can shift because of child care arrangements falling through, work hours or illness; and
3. Every interaction with parents is as relaxed, real and respectful as we can make it.

### ***INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:***

The interview is approximately 20 minutes in length. Allow at least half an hour for each person so that you can greet them and say goodbye properly. When interviewing parents, keep in mind that we have in common the experience of being parents. This helps establish immediate rapport.

1. How did you learn of this program? There must be a story to your coming here.
2. What are your concerns for children; for your own children as well as the children in the community?
3. As you look over this curriculum, what interests you? What do you think is missing in content or skills development?
4. If you go through the training, what will your goals be? What do you envision yourself doing with what you have learned?
5. What is your experience with people from different backgrounds.
6. Have you ever been in parent training before?
7. What questions do you have about the structure or content of this program?

## ***WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE COMMUNITY:***

### ***Creating a Mix:***

The selection process can help determine the potential for a community of parents. The class should create a mix of family situations, based on the marital status of the participants, the ages of the participants' children, whether or not the parents are working or at home and whether or not their children are in public or private school or at home. It works best to create a diverse and strong community of parents before the class begins.

## ***WHAT TO AVOID:***

There are three situations that we try to avoid when creating a community of parents:

1. Avoid putting too many parents together who know each other well from the same school or neighborhood. Parents will then tend to make the relationships within the whole class rather than relying on the people they know.
2. Avoid "professional" parents. The training should not take the place of professional development for a person who does community outreach to parents as paid work. If this is the case for someone, try to determine what the training has to offer that participant personally.
3. Do not encourage "single issue" parents. These are often parents, usually well-meaning, who always organize around the same issue and cannot look broadly at an issue.

**The community of parents is the family for the 20-week curriculum on self, society, and civics. The deeper the group in its range and insight, the stronger the critical thinking and goal setting of each participant will be for children.**

## **ESTABLISHING LOCAL DESIGN TEAMS FOR THE PLTI CLASS**

The PLTI program is a public-private partnership that links with local communities to increase the number of parents trained in civics and democracy.

Each town seeking to replicate the PLTI model sets up a Design Team to implement the program. The Design Team has the special function of informing the public, introducing the leadership training opportunities to parents, selecting parents to attend the program and ensuring that the courses run smoothly for the community.

Design Teams can be established through the leadership of an elected official, an agency, an initiative or a constituency group. For example, in Connecticut, Design Teams have been spearheaded by city health departments, community agencies, foundations and business leaders. In Alexandria, the program is a partnership, including the City of Alexandria, Hopkins House, Parent Leadership Training Institute of Alexandria, and the Connecticut Commission for Children. Participants must reflect the demographic profile of the parents in the community.

Local Design Teams find locations for classes, arrange for family supports such as dinner and childcare, and raise local funds to match other resources. The Connecticut Commission on Children offers Design Teams technical assistance in setting up a Parent Leadership Training Institute within a community.

The Connecticut PLTI coordinator offers: 1) teacher training for PLTI Facilitators who go through the full three-day training curriculum; 2) a tested curriculum of 20 weeks with focus on empowerment and civics skills for parents; 3) technical assistance for communities and systems interested in developing the capacity of parents for children.

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