

# Parent Leadership

on the Great Start  
Collaboratives

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR THE  
Great Start Collaboratives





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## Essential Information for Parent Members of Great Start Collaboratives

### Introduction

Congratulations and welcome to the Great Start Collaborative. We are glad you have agreed to work with others in your community to improve results for all young children and their families.

This Guide contains important information about your membership on the Great Start Collaborative. It is our hope that this information will help you to better understand the purpose and value of your membership on the Great Start Collaborative.

### Background Information

To ensure that all children arrive at the kindergarten door healthy, safe and eager to succeed in school, the Great Start system was created in Michigan. Each Great Start Collaborative's mission is to design a local comprehensive early childhood system that will coordinate both the public and private efforts that support and assist parents and young children.

The Early Childhood Investment Corporation (ECIC) was created in February 2005, and is charged with providing the governance, planning and coordination for Great Start. Additionally, the ECIC provides funds to 32 (as of 4/08) local Great Start Collaboratives that are building the local portion of the Great Start system. It is the work plan of ECIC to support all 57 Intermediate School Districts in developing a Great Start Collaborative by the year 2010 (if funding permits). Membership on the collaborative is made up of:

- ▮ Business leaders
- ▮ Philanthropic and charitable organizations (e.g., United Way, community foundations, etc.)
- ▮ At least two, directors of organizations that provide services on behalf of minority populations in the county and/or counties
- ▮ Faith-based organizations
- ▮ Intermediate school district
- ▮ Local publicly funded health, mental health and human services (Department of Human Services, local Public Health, and Community Mental Health Services programs)
- ▮ Managed care health plans and health care providers
- ▮ Family court and juvenile court
- ▮ *Early On®* Michigan and preschool special education
- ▮ Early care and education professional development providers, including Community Coordinated Child Care (4Cs)
- ▮ Head Start and the Michigan School Readiness Program
- ▮ Child care providers
- ▮ The K-16 education community, including the local education agencies and community colleges
- ▮ Local policy makers, and other elected officials from municipal government

One of the unique qualities of the Great Start Collaborative membership is that it includes parents; in fact 20% of the members are required to be parents of children under the age of 12 years.

## I. Why is it important for parents to be involved as members of the Great Start Collaborative?

### **Parents are the primary consumers**

Parents are the consumers for early childhood programs, services and supports and have key knowledge about what works and does not work for families with young children.

### **Parents are teachers**

Parents are the first and most important teachers in their children's lives.

### **Parents have the power**

Parents make the decisions about the early childhood programs young children will use. They help to make the case, in their communities, for the importance of investing in the early childhood years.

### **Policy-makers and legislators listen to parents**

Policy-makers know that parents vote. Parent voices are needed to help the state legislature, foundations and business understand the importance of adequate funding for high quality early childhood programs for ALL children.

*Parents provide the “real world” perspective on how programs really work both for their children and for themselves as parents.*



## **II. What unique contributions do parents provide as members of the Great Start Collaborative?**

Parents provide the “real world” perspective on how programs really work both for their children and for themselves as parents. Their input is based on experience...what it is really like to find, become eligible and use programs and services designed by professionals for families. Because of this unique vantage point, parents can help early childhood professionals to “think outside the box” as they work together to assess how well existing programs and services are working and what might be done better in the future.

Parents of young children also know and talk with other parents in their neighborhoods, child care centers or places of worship – they know the struggles of young families and can bring fresh and innovative ideas about how programs and services could be changed to work better for all families.

Parents who represent the diversity of the community, and are members of the Great Start Collaborative, can help to educate their fellow members on the impacts that race, culture, ethnicity and socio-economic status have on the choices that parents make about their young children. Increased understanding of these differences can then be thoughtfully incorporated into the plan that the Great Start Collaborative creates for the community.

## **III. What is my role as a parent member of the Great Start Collaborative?**

Your role is to represent the strengths, needs, hopes and dreams of the families of young children in your community. Twenty percent of the members of the Great Start Collaborative are required to be parents of children under the age of 12 years.

You will be actively involved in the decision-making process about what is needed to support young children and their parents in your community. There will be regularly scheduled business meetings to attend. All members are expected to be prepared and on time for meetings and present themselves in a professional manner. As a member, you may also need to meet with the Great Start Collaborative Coordinator and other Great Start Collaborative members to discuss and work on issues of concern outside of the official meetings. It is likely that you will be asked to serve on subcommittees that involve the work of your Great Start Collaborative.

## IV. What are the benefits for parents of being a member of the Great Start Collaborative?

Listed below are thoughts that other parent leaders have shared about the benefits of their membership on a Board, committee or workgroup...<sup>1</sup>

### **Provides opportunity to effect meaningful change**

By working with others who are committed to assuring that all children have access to high quality early childhood programs and services, parents can make a difference.

### **Improve services for own families**

By serving as a member of the GSC you can build knowledge and skills regarding community resources giving you an opportunity to gain better services and supports for your own family.

### **Feels good to make a contribution**

Some parents indicate that they develop a sense of personal power and accomplishment by participating in decision-making regarding better services and supports for young children and families.

### **Makes service providers more accountable to families**

With parents at the table, organizations are not alone when making decisions regarding services for families. Parents input will help guide services that would be user-friendly for families.



*Parents' input will help guide services that would be user-friendly for families.*

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from, "Making Room at the Table", produced jointly by the State's Initiative of the Family Resource Coalition of America and the Institute for Family-centered Care



**Provides opportunities to network with other families and providers**

It is a great way to meet other families and providers with similar values and goals.

**Makes things better for other families**

Other families may not feel comfortable coming forward or may not have the time; your involvement will benefit other families.

**Opens doors to employment**

Many parent volunteers acquire skills and knowledge that later can be used when applying for employment.

## **V. Lessons learned from parents involved on collaboratives, boards or other committees<sup>2</sup>**

**Know your strengths**

Spend some time with a trusted friend who can help you to identify what strengths you bring to the collaborative work. For example, the fact that you organized the PTA school carnival means you are a GREAT organizer and are clearly detail oriented.

**Gather information**

Learn about the prior work done by the collaborative or community on early childhood. Ask about the history, mission, and values that have been created. Talk to staff members and other families who are participating in early childhood programs, services or supports. Most importantly, find out what is expected of you as a member of the committee.

**Sell yourself**

Be knowledgeable about current events or policies that affect the work the group is doing and use them in conversation. Participate in events and activities supported by the collaborative members. You will get to know other families and staff members and can learn first hand what is needed.

**Get support**

Being a collaborative member can be demanding with a requirement of attendance at meetings and a need to be prepared. The support of your family and friends will help to sustain you during challenging times. Other parents in a similar role, as well as professionals, can also be a resource to you.

**Build your skills**

Many organizations offer training to build your knowledge and skills. Take advantage of opportunities presented to you. The more you know, the better resource person you can be to the collaborative and to other parents in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from, Thomas, J. & Jeppson, E.S. (1997), Words of Advice: A guidebook for families serving as advisors. Bethesda, MD: Institute for Family-Centered Care.

## **Plan for challenges**

Parent participation in decision-making about programs, services, and supports is still a new concept to some professionals, therefore, plan for some challenges. Some professionals may even feel threatened with this new role for parents.

The collaborative may not always be conscious of a parent's schedule when planning meetings, events, etc. Your voice is needed to ensure that the real lives of parents are taken into account in scheduling.

There may be personal challenges that come up as well. Your family or job can bring unexpected challenges causing you to need to reduce your time with the collaborative. It is key to talk with the Great Start Coordinator if this occurs so that he/she is aware and can work with you to put a plan into place to find a substitute or replacement for you.

## **VI. What supports are available to parent members of the Great Start Collaborative?**

### **Financial supports**

Parent members of the Great Start Collaborative receive a financial honorarium or stipend for their time, as well as reimbursement for childcare and travel expenses.

### **Educational Supports**

Great Start Collaboratives and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation will provide opportunities for parents to attend trainings or workshops to build knowledge and skills to more effectively serve on the Great Start Collaborative.

### **Mentoring Supports**

The Great Start Collaborative Director/Coordinator and other members of the collaborative will provide parents with opportunities to meet with staff regarding the agenda, debrief after meetings, and conduct open two-way communication regarding collaborative business.

### **Office Technology**

The Great Start Collaborative will support parents by discussing the need for access to work space, email, the internet, copying and postage.

### **Assistance from Great Start Collaborative Director/Coordinator**

The Great Start Collaborative Director/Coordinator is the paid staff for the Great Start Collaborative. This person is available to meet with you on an as needed basis, to address your questions and/or concerns about the work of the collaborative. The Director/Coordinator is to assist you with access to all the previously mentioned supports. He or she can be a great person to bounce your ideas off of. The Director/Coordinator plays a key role in the success of your Collaborative and is generally always looking for members to assist with the different projects of the Collaborative.

*Parents work hard to make sure that their children get what they need. Parents have lots of experience in not taking “No” for an answer.*



## **VII. What leadership qualities do current parent members of the Great Start Collaboratives believe that they bring to collaborative work?**

In June of 2006, parent members of Great Start Collaboratives gathered to answer this question. Below are the qualities that they identified. ..

### **Parents are knowledgeable about their communities**

Parents' expertise is in the real life knowledge they have about what it is like to live, work, and raise children in the community.

### **Parents have a unique perspective ... Life Experiences**

Parents provide first hand knowledge on how early childhood programs affect families.

### **Parents provide new ideas and a diverse perspective**

Parents often find it easier than their professional partners to think outside the box during brainstorming sessions, since their thinking and creativity is less bound by existing ways of doing business, policies, rules or regulations.

### **Parents are persistent and determined**

Parents work hard to make sure that their children get what they need. Parents have lots of experience in not taking “No” for the answer.

### **Parents have a passion for children**

Parents of young children have a unique perspective of what it is like to be raising those children in today's world.

### **Parents are optimistic**

Parents can provide the tools, patience and optimism needed to take a look with “new eyes” at what isn't working and offer new insights.

## VIII. Conclusion

Your involvement on the Great Start Collaborative is valuable. Parents are the primary consumers for early childhood programs, services and supports. You have key knowledge about what works and does not work for families with young children. Your voice is powerful. Organizations understand that policy-makers and legislators listen to parents. Parent voices are needed to help the state legislature, foundations and business understand the importance of adequate funding for high quality early childhood programs for ALL children. Don't be afraid to seek the supports you need from the collaborative to exercise your power!

This Guide was created by parents from the Great Start Collaboratives throughout Michigan with support from the Early Childhood Investment Corporation.



*Your voice is powerful.  
Organizations understand  
that policy-makers and  
legislators listen to parents.*

### Publications cited for this Guide:

***Words of Advice: A Guidebook for Families Serving As Advisors***, Josie Thomas & Elizabeth S. Jeppson; ***Making Room At The Table***, States Initiative of the Family Resource Coalition of America and the Institute for Family-Centered Care; ***Parental Involvement in Decision-Making***, National Center for Early Development & Learning Spotlights; ***Report from Great Start Strategic Planning Parent Focus Group***; ***Parents Becoming Leaders: Getting Involved on Behalf of Children***, Miriam Westheimer.



## Supplemental Documents for Coordinators and/or Collaborative Members

### Helpful Tips Engaging and Sustaining Parent Members on the Great Start Collaborative

#### **I. What have the fields of health and human services learned about the impact of parent involvement?**

Research and experience have shown that programs and services jointly designed by parents, professionals and policy-makers are the most likely to succeed.

#### **II. Is all parent involvement the same? Does the nature of parent involvement change over time?**

Parent members on the collaborative will come with knowledge, skill, and experiences that once engaged may emerge as leaders that are empowered and involved. Parents should be valued for their contributions individually and not as a group; some will need time to grow through stages recognizing that all levels of involvement possess leadership characteristics.

According to, “Parents Becoming Leaders: Getting Involved on Behalf of Children”, parental input is a continuum, where engagement leads to involvement, which leads to empowerment.

Engagement



Involvement



Empowerment

**Engagement:** During this first stage, parents are invited to the committee to learn about how it works. Parents and professionals get to know each other at meetings and begin to build a trusting relationship with each other.

**Involvement:** During this next stage, parents become more involved by attending training opportunities. Parents are often involved in the planning of these opportunities. Therefore parents are participating, receiving training, and beginning to provide advice through their membership.

**Empowerment:** During the final stage, organizations that have provided ample training and opportunities for parents to be included in decision-making can now rely on them to lead and organize other parents and programs that will benefit parents.

### III. What types of financial supports are helpful to parent members?

**Financial supports that are helpful to parents include:**

- A financial honorarium or stipend for their time;
- Reimbursement for childcare;
- Reimbursement for travel expenses;



*Organizations that have provided ample training and opportunities for parents to be included in decision-making can now rely on them to lead and organize other parents and programs that will benefit parents.*

*Good communication and coordination of meetings – including opportunities to meet regularly with the Great Start Collaborative Coordinator help maintain parent involvement.*



#### **IV. What types of non-financial supports are helpful to parent members?**

**Non-financial supports that are helpful to parents include:**

- ▶ Background information about prior work, strategic plans, etc. ahead of the meetings;
- ▶ Opportunities for information sharing among parents;
- ▶ A personal, face-to-face invitation to become a member;
- ▶ Access to topic specific resource information;
- ▶ A family-centered approach, where members demonstrate, by their actions and words, their respect for parents' input, time and existing personal/work commitments;
- ▶ Good communication and coordination of meetings – including opportunities to meet regularly with the Great Start Collaborative Coordinator both prior to and after the meeting to prepare and debrief, respectively;
- ▶ Demonstrated respect, especially at the table with other partners, in the discussion and decision-making process;





## Engaging and Sustaining Parent Members on the Great Start Collaborative: **Helpful Tips for Great Start Collaborative Members & Great Start Coordinators**

### **I. How do we recruit parents who represent the diversity of our community?**

#### **Develop a recruitment brochure or flyer**

Provide information about the work and how parents can become engaged and roles they can play. Include information about financial supports: stipend, childcare and mileage reimbursement.

#### **Provide an inviting environment for all**

Encourage parents already engaged to invite other parents that they know in the community. Work with faith-based organizations, child care centers, and other community organizations to identify persons who are ready to commit to being members of the Great Start Collaborative.

#### **Develop partnerships**

Extend an invitation to other organizations that have parents on their Boards, (e.g. Head Start, Community Mental Health Service Programs, hospitals, private child-family serving organizations, etc.), and seek these parents out and invite them to become engaged.

#### **Visit places where parents already are**

Preschools, child care centers, community centers, family resource centers, neighborhood organizations, advocacy groups, etc. are all good places to actively seek out and recruit parents.



## **II. What do we need to do to ensure that all members will sustain their participation?**

### **Ask for the opinions and perspective of each parent member**

Respect everyone's input – Listen, acknowledge their contributions.

### **Act on the suggestions and input of all members**

Members will remain involved if they see that they are making a difference.

### **Seek feedback from parents**

Ask parent members how they think the meetings are working and how the project/process is going. Make adjustments based on this input.

### **Engage all members from the very beginning**

Do not wait until its "all figured out" before inviting them to the table.

### **Make sure that there are adequate numbers of parents involved**

No parent (or person) wants to feel like a "token"; a greater number of parents will provide more diversity as well as create a support system for all the parents involved.

### **Treat every member with respect**

Provide all parent members with information, in a private setting, about financial supports. Don't make assumptions! Be flexible in what supports are provided to assure they meet parent's individual needs.

### **Offer additional supports**

Parent members should be privileged to office space if needed, the use of computers (internet), telephone, copier, etc. Have fellow members act as mentors, debriefing with parents before and after meetings, if desired.

### **Build parent members strengths and knowledge**

Offer access to learning opportunities that build all members strengths and knowledge, make sure opportunities are available for everyone to attend.

### **Parent members feel more comfortable if they are knowledgeable about the meeting process**

Create meeting norms that assure every one understands how meetings work, how decisions are made, and how conflicts will be resolved.

### **Eliminate the use of Acronyms**

Collaborative members should not use acronyms common to a particular field of practice. The Collaborative membership is made up of various occupations and organizations and such acronyms may not be common in other arenas.

### III. What is “true collaboration” for Great Start Collaborative members?

The goal of the Great Start Collaborative is “true collaboration” between all members including parents.<sup>3</sup>

“True Collaboration” is when partners:

- ▶ show mutual respect for the skills and knowledge that each brings to the table;
- ▶ share in the planning and decision making (Private meetings of a limited number of members and/or parking lot meetings concerning the collaborative should be discouraged);
- ▶ display understanding and empathy for others in the group;
- ▶ demonstrate an absence of labeling and blaming in disagreements;
- ▶ have a shared understanding of how decisions will be made and conflict will be dealt with;
- ▶ have mutually agreed upon goals;
- ▶ are accessible and responsive to the needs of the group;
- ▶ participate in joint evaluation of the progress.

### Conclusion

Parents provide the “real world,” end-user perspective on how programs really work both for their children and for themselves as parents. Their input is based on experience...what it is really like to find, become eligible and use programs and services designed by professionals for families. Because of this unique vantage point, parents can help early childhood professionals to “think outside the box” as they work together to assess how well existing programs and services are working and what might be done better in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from, *Focal Point*, (1987), Vol.2, Research and Training Center, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Portland, OR



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