

ADVOCACY THAT BUILDS PARENTS' POWER

Summary of What States Learned
about Partnering with Parents

About the Research Evaluators

In 2021, the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) (RWJF) funded two 18-month projects to support state policy advocates working on Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to increase the role that parents play in their advocacy efforts, particularly parents who have experienced the effects of structural racism.

The [Center for Evaluation Innovation](#) (CEI) partnered with the [Center on the Ecology of Early Development](#) (CEED) at Boston University in the Wheelock College of Education and Human Development to evaluate two foundation-funded projects that supported state policy advocates in shifting toward advocacy designed to both win and build power.

About This Brief

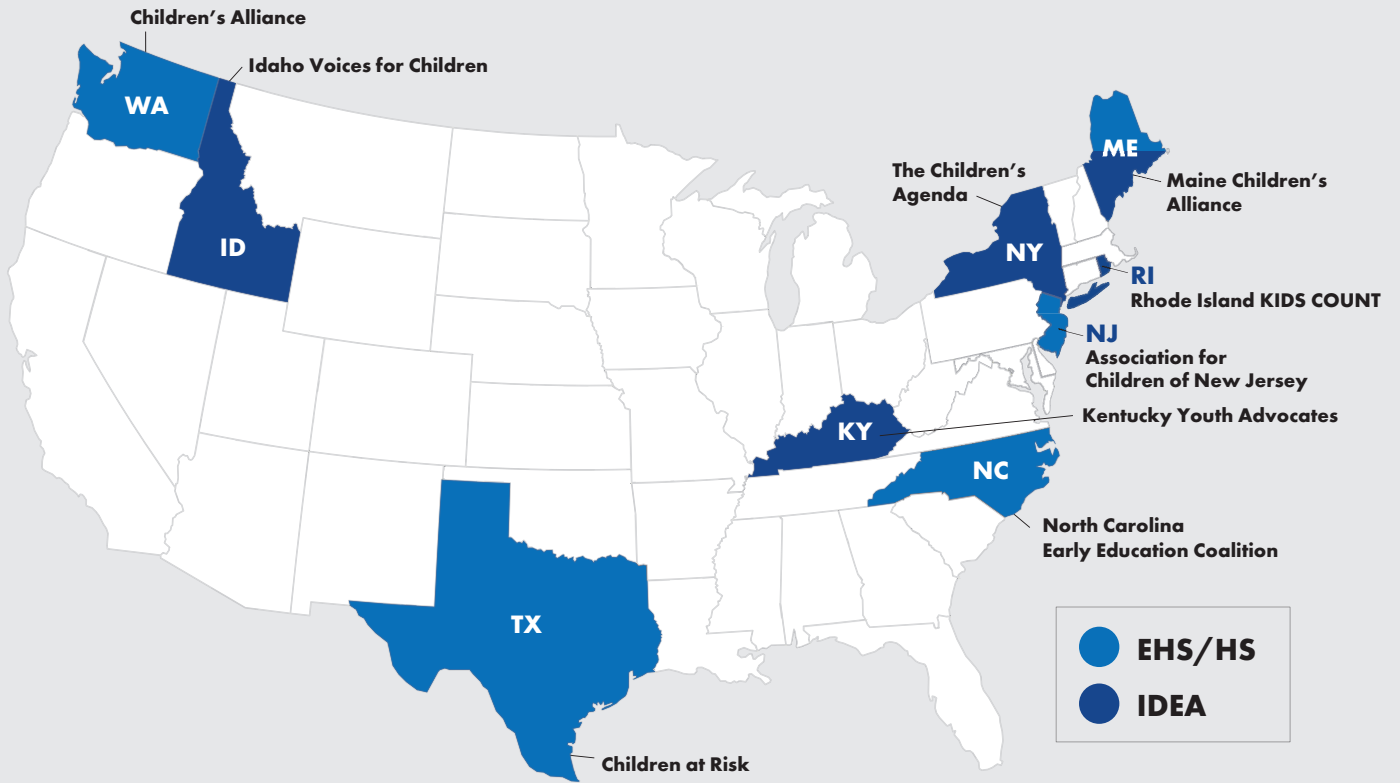
The goal of this brief is to provide a summary of what states learned throughout the year as they were striving to understand how to better partner with parents in order to learn to listen to them and to help families learn to advocate on behalf of themselves and their children.



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Who Was Involved in This Evaluation



States Selected and State Leads

Two national organizations—Zero to Three for EHS/HS and Partnership for America’s Children on IDEA—were funded to support each project and to identify and regrant funds to states. Each organization had a strong background in its respective policy areas and had established relationships with state advocates across the country. Partners included groups who could offer expertise on federal and state EHS/HS and IDEA policies, parent engagement, and racial equity (see Table 2).

Table 2. National Partner Teams

Partners	Early Head Start/Head Start	IDEA
National Lead	Zero to Three	Partnership for America’s Children
Other National Collaborators	Partnership for America’s Children	Start Early
Parent-Focused Collaborators	United Parent Leaders Action Network	United Parent Leaders Action Network Moms Rising
Equity Consultants	Counterpart Consulting	Educational Equity Institute

Questions to Be Answered

How are state EHS/HS and IDEA early childhood advocates centering parents in their work, particularly those parents impacted by the structural racism that is embedded in services and systems?

Findings

FINDING 1

States learned they have to put parents' voices at the center.



All state leads said that centering parent voice and expertise in driving a policy agenda was something they had not prioritized previously and that they had to learn to do better. The advocacy partners within the states worked with parent-focused organizers or organizations to help them learn to center parents' voices. Even though states were just beginning the process of building trust and strengthening their relationships with parents, the parents we talked to confirmed that advocacy groups had been welcoming and supportive.

“I can't think of a time that I ... or a part of our group ... have said something and it went ignored. Even if the answer or the response that we got wasn't the desired response, ... there was still a response there. And so, you know, it feels good to know that you have people who care, at least to hear your voice. Whether or not they could do anything about it is different.”

— Parent Advocate

FINDING 2

States realized they needed to use an organizing approach with parents.



States that progressed the most on centering parent voice used an organizing approach that included base building, healing, leadership development, campaigns, and storytelling. One-to-one relationships between advocates and parents were central to this transformational process. Those states that adopted an organizing approach moved farthest toward the goal of centering parents in their advocacy work. Those states that used the organizing approach shared power equally with partners.

“Organizing is about building distributed leadership: capitalizing on people's motivations and capacities to increase their involvement and building their capacity to organize others to take collective action.”

— Nancy Latham

FINDING 3

Organizing approaches led by people of color are helping states engage parents affected by structural racism.



All state advocacy partners said that engaging parents of color who have been impacted by structural racism is a priority for them. States that have done the most on this goal partnered with or created parent-focused groups led by people of color. Some of these parent-focused groups in states such as Kentucky and Rhode Island have created opportunities for parents to interact directly with people who hold power in early care and education systems.

FINDING 4

States are still working to teach all advocacy partners how best to engage parents.



State advocates were initially apprehensive and unsure how to begin partnerships with parents, but over the course of the year, states saw the value of the expertise of parent organizers and parents' contributions.

Some parents expressed that they do not feel listened to in ways that give them confidence that people with the power to change policies and the distribution of resources will prioritize the changes parents want to see.

“When elections come around, and they say, ‘I’m going to do this, and I’m going to make things more affordable, and I’m going to change the world.’ And then they get elected. And not one thing happens. That’s just what they’re doing. The same thing. ... You know, [it’s all] a show. They want to tell you what you want to hear because the right people are listening. Makes them look good.”

“I would just ask them to put [themselves] in the shoes of these people and really try and understand that there are so many barriers in place for families to be successful, for them to thrive. And if [they] could, put [themselves] into the shoes and spend a day in the life of a parent who might have a child with special needs or a parent who might be struggling with getting childcare.”

— Parent Advocate

Hearing directly from parents about their needs and ideas for solutions supports the kind of relationship building that is successful in showing parents' expertise and point of view. So many advocates coach and teach parents how to share their experiences and ideas with legislators.

“They also helped teach us how to advocate, look into those policies. Again, I’m familiar with doing the phone call to your legislator. ... But again, that’s a little bit different when you have a child or family member going through something, so you push a lot harder. So, while they heard our concerns, they help us kind of turn that around as fuel to build that advocacy for ourselves. So, know how to turn those concerns into things that you want to be changed. So speaking to some of your officials, don’t just take the first thing that comes to you. And they were really supportive, too. If we needed their help, they would be like our little family, in a sense, to help us speak up on our children’s behalf.”

— Parent Advocate

What Happens Next

All states made progress in increasing the role that parents play in advocacy efforts, and they are eager to continue their partnerships with parents.

RWJF committed an additional year of funding to this work and, in the new year, will have a broader focus on economic inclusion for children and families. While states can continue to focus on EHS/HS and IDEA, they can also use the funds for a broader range of issues **that parents want to address.**



The parents we talked to are interested in increasing the number of parents involved.



They would like to exercise their increasing power by advocating for greater compensation for their time and involvement, as well as more opportunities for professional development.