



## ACCELERATING ACTION AND GAINING TRACTION IN EC SYSTEMS BUILDING INITIATIVES:

### **Engage and Empower Families at all Levels of Leadership**

Organization, Community Initiative, State Initiative, Cross Sector State Level Initiative

Case Studies from the ECCS Impact CollIN, 2021

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The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a five year effort (August 1, 2016 through July 31, 2021) to strengthen systems to improve population level early childhood developmental health and family well-being in 28 communities across 12 states. The aspirational aim of this program was to increase age-appropriate developmental skills among three-year-old children and reduce developmental disparities. The goals that were prioritized in order to move towards the aspirational aim included:

- ▶ Create a Common Agenda/Shared Vision and Strategies
- ▶ Develop Shared Data Systems
- ▶ Promote Aligned and Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- ▶ Provide Backbone Support and Mechanisms for Continuous Communication Between State and Community
- ▶ Disseminate EC Development/Systems Information
- ▶ Integrate Early Developmental Promotion, Screening, Referral, Linkage, and Developmental Processes across and within sectors and communities
- ▶ Build Care Coordination Capacity
- ▶ Support Continuous Learning and Improvement Efforts
- ▶ Develop and Maintain Partnerships and Networks
- ▶ Family Leadership
- ▶ Build Public Will
- ▶ Advance Policies and Mobilize Funding to Sustain System Improvements

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (ECCS CoIIN) was a nationwide initiative to improve outcomes in population-based children's developmental health and family well-being, funded by the Health Resources & Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB).



### Overview of ECCS CoIIN

An expanding body of scientific evidence points to the critical importance of early childhood experiences (prenatal through age three) in setting the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that an increasing proportion of young children and families are falling behind: that inequities related to race, place, and income for the youngest children and their families are all too common and too often translate into lifelong disadvantages in health, education, economic success, and general well-being. As a result, in communities and states across the country, there is a growing movement to develop coordinated, effective, and high-quality systems to support all parents and give all young children an optimal start. ECCS CoIIN is one of these systems-building initiatives.

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### Introduction

“Nothing about us without us”<sup>1</sup> is a refrain used to communicate the importance of involving the representatives from the populations served when making decisions about the programs and policies supporting them. For early childhood systems-building, these representatives are families from the communities who are raising young children or grandchildren and who will be impacted by decisions made. Supporting these families to be leaders can happen at many levels, ranging from an individual provider and family 1:1 relationship to many providers collaborating to build capacity of families and empowering them to influence the collective system. This brief highlights the latter through presenting successful strategies in three of the ECCS CoIIN states and their place-based communities, including Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey.

### Family Leadership at the National Level

During the five years of the ECCS CoIIN, family leadership became an increasingly high priority as states and the network began to better understand the importance of meaningfully engaging families in all aspects of the work. From the start of the ECCS CoIIN, family partners were part of the national faculty team, and states and communities recognized that parent voice and leadership was central to success. Throughout the ECCS CoIIN, the family faculty partners held family leader communities of practice, which were opportunities for families from different states and communities to share experiences with one another and for state and community leads to learn more about the strategies for recruiting, training, and retaining family leaders. Family leader participation in these network-wide community of practice meetings increased over time. All the learning sessions throughout the five-year project had at least one session spotlighting family involvement, where families and ECCS state and community leads shared their stories and strategies. As the five years progressed, the family leaders themselves became the presenters. In the final two years of the ECCS CoIIN, the faculty partners supported states and communities in administering the [Family Engagement in Systems Assessment Toolkit \(FESAT\)](#) to identify priorities in furthering the advancement of families as leaders.

### Family Leadership within ECCS CoIIN States and Communities

The ECCS CoIIN state teams and community teams illustrated many ways to engage families as leaders. Some examples of these strategies include eliciting feedback on programs to inform specific programmatic improvement, inviting families to be members on state- and community-level advisory committees tasked with making decisions in areas that include program direction or policymaking, teaching families in the community about the importance of early childhood and developmental health, and presenting to national networks of states and communities doing similar work at network meetings or conferences. This brief highlights examples of family leadership strategies implemented by three ECCS CoIIN state teams and some of their local community teams.

Key accelerators that successfully cultivated and empowered families as leaders arising from these state teams and community teams include:



Creation of a culture of families as leaders



Integration of family leadership at both state and community levels



Provision of training to build leadership skills of family partners



Connection of family leadership to equity work



Encouragement of family leaders from communities most impacted

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### Florida

The Florida ECCS team is based in the Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions, a non-profit that works closely with state departments. Florida identified two place-based communities in Liberty City (Miami) and Jacksonville. Midway through the project, Jacksonville transitioned out of the ECCS work and the community of Tampa was added.

### Massachusetts

The Massachusetts ECCS initiative (MECCS) is based at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Springfield is one of the two place-based communities selected to be part of the ECCS ColIN in Massachusetts. Square One, a Springfield-based community organization, acts as the backbone organization for the ECCS ColIN work in Springfield. Square One's vision is "to affect meaningful change that results in better lives and more promising futures for children, families and our communities."

### New Jersey

The New Jersey ECCS initiative is based in the NJ Department of Children and Families. New Jersey identified five communities at the county level to be part of the NJ ECCS work (Camden, Cumberland, Essex, Middlesex, and Passaic).



### Creation of a Culture of Respect for Families as Leaders

It is important to create a culture where families are comfortable speaking up as equal participants and leaders. Florida accomplished this through power-sharing by ensuring that parents are not only at the table, but are active participants and co-creators. They used the EC-LINC's [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#) as a resource to help shape their parent leadership and equity efforts. This Manifesto includes five commitments for change: challenge racism, embrace parent leadership, prioritize resources, create career pathways, and maximize equitable outcomes. This strategy of power-sharing ensures that people with lived experience are part of the systems building process, paving the way for more equitable systems and services. To show respect and value of families' time, Florida provides compensation for time and travel expenses for participation in meetings.

According to Ghia Kelly, the FL ECCS state lead, seeing parents as experts was key:

**"Really allowing parents the space and the freedom to share their experiences so that we can do the work that's necessary to change it. We really saw them as experts. We make sure that parents are not just in the room, but they have a seat at the table and their mic is on and turned up very, very loud."**

As part of their focus on equity, Massachusetts worked to engage a diverse group of families from communities served for participation in the Young Children's Council (YCC), a cross-sector and cross-departmental council tasked with making key decisions about early childhood initiatives in Massachusetts. The YCC started meeting 10 years ago to discuss programs related child development, mental health, and early childhood systems-building. Families were involved in the YCC but it was not very intentional. With equity in mind, MECCS aimed to **"transform the Council to be a sustainable platform to really partner with families and work toward codesign and really have families partner in our work."**

They are working to build a culture where families' experiences are in the forefront, ensuring that families are always comfortable sharing experiences and honest feedback and working with providers to alleviate the defensiveness they sometimes express in response to a family sharing feedback. The YCC is moving toward asking families how they would like to be involved in the work and creating a process to support them in the roles they identify for themselves. Family leaders are given the opportunity to plan the meeting agendas, which include dedicated time for family leaders, space to create meeting agreements, and opportunities to discuss shared practices. MECCS is exploring creating another family leader group that will strategize how to consistently compensate families through a partnership with Title V.



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New Jersey empowered their family partners to take on key transformational leadership roles in their communities, at the state and national level. To frame their family engagement work, New Jersey adapted the Strive Together Community Engagement Continuum. The continuum features 3 levels of engagement: “Transactional, Transitional, and Transformational.” Transformational being the highest level of engagement where families sit in the role of key decision makers, planners and presenters in the Early Childhood systems work. Examples of transformational leadership of the New Jersey parent leaders included presenting on several parent panels at ECCS CoIIN network meetings both virtually and in person, mentoring the Delaware ECCS team on engagement of parents and presenting at the Delaware “Parent Leader Graduation.” Other transformational activities included participating in Learn. the Signs. Act. Early (LTSAE) Parent Champion Training and Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)-3 training, and presenting sessions on Help Me Grow, developmental health promotion and LTSAE throughout the grant. They also presented at the National Early Childhood Family Network. Parent leaders participated in the family cohort of the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs (AMCHP) Leadership Lab, and the New Jersey Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Leadership training. One community, Essex, supported a family leader in leading a “Dad Subcommittee” of the Essex County Councils for Young Children (CCYC). Several of the parent leaders also participated in the Brazelton TouchPoints Training and are now certified.



### Provision of Training to Build Leadership Skills of Family Partners

The Springfield ECCS lead partnered with a Square One Board member and family leaders to create a parent leadership training series that was open to YCC members and others in the community. The intention was to support families in building leadership and advocacy skills in both their own lives as well as in the community.

To build the parents’ leadership skills, the Florida team funded six parent leaders from six Florida place-based communities (including their two ECCS community teams) to travel and attend a Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) training that focused on advocacy at several levels (individual, family, and policy). The state parent lead provides on-going training and mentorship to the parent leads in the ECCS counties.



### Encouragement of Family Leaders from Communities Most Impacted

Involving parents as leaders and experts from communities most impacted is important to building systems in a way that will address the issues and benefit community members. According to Ghia Kelly, the Florida ECCS CoIIN Grantee Lead, Florida’s ECCS work has been centered around equity from the start based on initial priorities identified by community members in focus groups. The initial place-based communities were **“largely African American communities that were under resourced with tons of barriers, and so we were aware of the impacts of racism and intergenerational poverty.”**



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The work in the ECCS place-based community, Liberty City, started with focus groups seeking feedback from families in the community to inform their improvement efforts. Racial bias was a key theme arising out of these discussions. Based on this feedback, they began to focus directly on addressing racial inequities (as opposed to disparities and social determinants of health) at both the community and the state level. The inequities faced by these families in many different areas (e.g., housing, healthcare, education) led to Florida's priority of racial equity. Later, they added the place-based community, Town and Country, with a large Latinx community. The glaring issues of immigration and language barriers within this community caused Florida ECCS to expand their equity focus to include ethnic equity and language justice (or the right everyone has to communicate in the language one feels most comfortable).<sup>2</sup>

At the start of the five-year ECCS CoIIN project, the MA Department of Public Health identified partnerships with families and communities as an area in need of improvement. At the state level, the Massachusetts Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Project (MECCS) identified the need to integrate **“the experiences of the people most impacted by our programs and policy decisions”** into early childhood program design and decision-making. Each of New Jersey's five communities actively engaged families in meeting participation, and recruited family leaders to provide feedback based on their lived experience.



### Integration of Family Leadership at Both State and Community Levels

It is important to include family leaders at both the state and community level. As mentioned earlier, families in MA were actively involved in state level leadership through their participation in YCC. MECCS also formed a partnership with Families First, which provided family leadership training and education on early childhood parenting, to sponsor a Families First graduate as an intern family leader on the YCC. Family leaders were also involved in decision-making around Massachusetts Title V priorities and state action plans. Through this work, Eve Wilder, the MA ECCS State lead has learned to “acknowledge and address mistakes, approach the process with humility, openness to feedback and transparency around limitations like the large bureaucracy the DPH resides in.”

At a community level, Springfield, MA's family engagement work was connected to its racial equity goals with a focus on engaging families as leaders who were representative of the Springfield community. The Springfield YCC is completely family-led and driven. The YCC meets monthly in Springfield, and the family leaders conducted some of the screening as part of the community's developmental screening initiative. Square One provided the family leaders with stipends, training, and oversight to support them in this work.

In Florida, multiple parents actively participated in the advisory group at both the community and state levels by sharing their lived experiences to guide and inform the ECCS work moving forward. They sought and received additional funding through Nemours Children's Health System, which allowed them to further amplify the voices of the parents and advance equity.

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At the community level, Florida provided groups for parents to strengthen parent-child interaction through training ECCS coordinators in [Circle of Security](#). One of the Florida community teams, Town and Country, conducted a [Circle of Security](#) group specifically for male caregivers in their community, which was significant considering the community initially lacked trust in local programs. In Liberty City, parents were trained as trusted messengers in [Talking is Teaching](#). The parent messengers act as champions in the community to support parents in improving their babies' learning. The Liberty City ECCS community team valued building trusted relationships with community members by engaging parents who knocked on doors and attended community events.

New Jersey built an infrastructure of parent leaders at the state and community levels. At the state level, New Jersey employed a state parent lead who also served as the LTSAE Ambassador and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) parent lead. The state parent lead provided support and mentorship to the county level parent leaders. At the community and county level, families participated in CCYCs throughout the state. Parents, community leaders, and service providers participated in CCYCs, which were tasked with making recommendations on improvement efforts around children's education and health in their respective counties. These recommendations inform decision making on policy and funding in New Jersey. New Jersey is also home to SPAN Parent Advocacy Network that empowers and supports families. SPAN is a close partner of ECCS. SPAN serves as a parent training resource for the CCYCs.



### Connection of Family Leadership to Equity Work

Not only do family leaders bring historical and lived knowledge about how to raise their children within the community in which they live, they can also bring critical expertise in how to advance racial justice and overall community well-being. As noted above, Massachusetts and Florida have found success in engaging and supporting family leaders by intentionally tying it to their equity work. In turn, engaging families from the communities served supports their work in building equity.

It is also important to consider how to raise awareness and address ways that implicit biases can impact the engagement of families. The Florida team strategized the places where they could make change from within the existing systems and where they would need to do the even harder work of dismantling institutional and systemic racism. The team held meetings with state partners where they had courageous conversations to establish shared language, define racism, and white privilege. Through this process, they became aware of how their own implicit biases can impact how families are engaged.

This case study is one of six developed through the ECCS CoIIN initiative. This series of six case studies identify key accelerators of early childhood system building, highlighting what was learned from the ECCS CoIIN Initiative and sharing bright spots of states and communities. All six case studies can be found at <https://www.nichq.org/project/early-childhood-comprehensive-systems-collaborative-improvement-and-innovation-network-eccs>.

<sup>1</sup> "International Day of Disabled Persons 2004." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Disability, United Nations, 3 Dec. 2004, [www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-3-december/international-day-of-disabled-persons-2004-nothing-about-us-without-us.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/international-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-3-december/international-day-of-disabled-persons-2004-nothing-about-us-without-us.html).

<sup>2</sup> Antena Aire. (n.d.). *Principles*. <https://antenaantena.org/principles/#:~:text=Language%20justice%20is%20social%20%20justice,comfortable%20at%20a%20given%20time.&text=At%20the%20heart%20of%20language,%2C%20heard%2C%20%20appreciated%20and%20honored>.

