

From Performative Inclusion To Authentic Partnership

Missed opportunities for equitable inclusion and sharing power with families

What to do instead

Showcasing one “star” parent at events or meetings, while failing to build pathways for broader participation and leadership

Build pathways to family leadership

- Rotate speaking and leadership opportunities
- Co-facilitate leadership cohorts or learning circles with families
- Create transparent, inclusive selection processes
- Offer ongoing mentorship and support for new leaders, not just those who are already comfortable

Inviting families into legislative efforts only after decisions have been made

Include families in strategy design

- Ask families what policy issues matter most to them right now
- Invite families into planning from the start
- Hold co-creation sessions for campaign messaging, platform development, and meeting content and design
- Ensure family leaders review and approve talking points before use

Celebrating family engagement “wins” in reports when they don’t reflect the lived realities of most families in the system

Ground reports in accountability

- Include metrics like, “What changed because of family leadership?”
- Highlight challenges, tensions, and next steps that families have named
- Ask a family leader to co-write or co-present the report
- Focus on alignment with family-identified priorities, not just staff narratives

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What to do instead

Creating advisory groups with no decision-making power – only space to inform

Build true governance roles

- Give advisory groups formal voting rights on at least one key decision area (e.g., budget priorities, policy platform, hiring, etc.)
- Have family leaders co-chair committees with staff
- Pay family advisors as consultants, not volunteers
- Align advisory timelines with actual decision windows, not after-the-fact input

Continuing to operate policy advocacy tables that center “traditional ways” of working for policy professionals, and not families or parents.

Build organizational readiness for power-sharing with family leaders

- Engage as an organization in training to prepare for power-sharing with family leaders
- Explore and undertake mindset work to identify and improve biases and barriers that have historically prevented power-sharing with families
- Revise ways of working, group norms, and policies with family leaders to be more equitable and centered on prioritizing family voice instead of the organization’s priorities

Hosting meetings in English only, even with multilingual communities, or failing to meet broader accessibility needs

Design for language justice and inclusion

- Offer real-time interpretation, captioning, and/or other accessible supports
- Hire co-facilitators who are fluent in community languages
- Translate materials before meetings, not after, and in multiple formats: audio, large print, plain language, and screen-reader compatible
- Ensure in-person locations meet accessibility needs (i.e. ramps, signage, lighting, quiet spaces, lactation spaces, etc.)
- Create opportunities for language-diverse and disability-diverse reflection spaces
- Avoid jargon, technical language, and acronyms
- Share agendas and materials in advance to support different processing and preparation needs

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What to do instead

Prioritizing families who are “on message” or professionally polished

Redefine credibility and leadership

- Celebrate vulnerability, emotional expression, and plain language
- Make speaking prep optional, not mandatory, for engagement
- Normalize space for disagreement, truth-telling, and off-script dialogue (i.e. meeting agreements)

Holding space for family stories, but not for emotion or discomfort

Facilitate for emotional protection and dignity

- Embrace emotional leadership and responses
- Provide processing spaces for families after storytelling moments
- Resource healing practices and trauma-responsive practitioners or peers in high-stakes sessions

Relying on existing relationships to select family leaders or participants

Widen the circle

- Partner with community-led organizations, faith communities, schools, and local cooperatives
- Host open calls or informal listening sessions with communities that aren't involved yet
- Fund community outreach roles for new family leader recruitment

Collecting family input, but not circling back to share how it was used

Close the loop

- Share a summary of the feedback and what actions were (or were not) taken, and why
- Acknowledge limits honestly if input couldn't be implemented
- Invite families into future decision cycles based on their initial input

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What to do instead

Not naming or taking accountability for past harm, broken trust, mistakes made, and ongoing impact

Acknowledge harm, repair relationships, and commit to centering families

- Begin with truth-telling and repair
- Name the harm clearly – refuse to sanitize or generalize
- Acknowledge both the incident and the impact
- Speak from a place of responsibility (“We got it wrong” vs. “Things got missed”)
- Validate the experience of those impacted – refuse to center institutional intentions
- Hold space for dialogue with those harmed before launching new efforts
- Co-create accountability measures with families, not just internal teams
- Choose to be trustworthy: take consistent actions in response to expressed needs and follow through transparently
- Honor history by naming and showing how change is rooted in learning from the past

Using family photos or quotes in materials without compensation or ongoing consent and without other ongoing family involvement

Ensure shared benefit and control

- Ask for informed consent on how families’ images and stories are used
- Include families in the design and direction of proposals and campaigns
- Offer families the opportunity to edit or withdraw content
- Compensate families for their time, likeness, and intellectual contributions
- Include families as reviewers and co-authors of campaign and advocacy materials

Diversify roles for family leadership

- Invite families to co-design evaluation plans and decide what impact matters
- Resource and build compensated advisory roles into strategic planning teams
- Offer skill-building pathways for families interested in data, community, policy, etc.

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