

Funders for Family Leadership



Landscape Review

Beyond a Toolkit - A Journey of Partnership, Learning, and Parent Power

DECEMBER 2025

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Terminology

UPLAN

The United Parent Leaders Action Network is a non-partisan network of parent leaders from across the country that advocate for policy priorities that matter to families. Together, UPLAN represents 36 parent-led organizations.

FFL

Funders for Family Leadership is a learning community of funders across the country, dedicated to transforming philanthropic practice to equitably partner with and center family leaders so that system changes are led by their expertise and lived experiences.

VIVA

VIVA Social Impact Partners is a social impact consulting firm that works with philanthropic, nonprofit, and public agencies.

Executive Summary

From 2020 to 2025, Funders for Family Leadership (FFL) partnered with the United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN) to transform philanthropic practices by centering family leaders and sharing power with parents. As FFL closes, this report captures what was learned, what shifted in funder practice, and what the field needs to continue this work.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Co-created the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership with parent and funder input to help foundations examine power, practices, and relationships
- Defined with parents what authentic partnership looks like in practice, including relationship-building, parent-led decision-making, transparency, accountability, and fair compensation
- Launched Parent-Funder Learning Community in 2021 with 11 funders and 11 parent leaders testing and refining the tool in practice
- Conducted national outreach through conferences, digital campaigns, and co-presentations by parents and funders

MAJOR PRACTICE SHIFTS IN FOUNDATIONS

- Deeper parent engagement in grantmaking: Foundations moved from information gathering to sharing power with parent leaders through participatory grantmaking, family advisory boards, and even seating parents on paid staff and boards. Keys to success included trusted community consultants, board culture shifts, and addressing operational barriers (like payment systems).
- Intentional time for reflection and healing: Foundations learned to “go slow to move fast”, building in time for learning, working through differences, and repairing harm. Authentic parent partnerships require flexible timelines to allow time for reflection and feedback.
- Shared language and communication: Taking time to establish shared language, clear communication practices, and mutual learning opportunities, for both parent leaders and funders, proved essential.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Structural barriers: Within their foundations, funders often faced apprehensive boards, limiting operational policies, and leaders who did not understand the connection between parent power-building and foundation priorities.
- Tool adoption: The Self-Reflection Tool was often treated as a standalone product rather than as a tool that required ongoing dialogue, reflection, and facilitation, causing limited adoption.

- Declining engagement and funding: As funders found opportunities for reflection and learning with their own local ecosystems, the need for a separate learning community became less imperative. Long-standing networks and collaboratives are now engaging in these concepts and funders have built their own partnerships and power-building practices.

WHAT THE FIELD NEEDS NOW

- More storytelling and communication: Foundations should be more transparent in sharing what's happening across the field: what's being tried, what's working, and what impact parent-centered work is having in their communities.
- Cross-sharing of resources: Foundations should share tools, practices, and learnings, both with philanthropic peers and with grantees.
- Infrastructure for partnership: Foundations should invest in infrastructure that makes authentic partnership possible, including fair compensation for parent leaders, trusted facilitators, adequate time for relationship-building, and operational systems that support rather than hinder collaboration.



LOOKING FORWARD

While FFL is sunsetting, the work of equitable parent partnership continues. The Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool remains available as a resource for funders committed to examining their practices and deepening collaboration with parents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the dedication of many individuals and organizations who shaped the Funders for Family Leadership initiative from its inception to its closing chapter.

To the Parent Leaders, Sara Morrison, Rosazlia Grillier, and Muna Hussein, and United Parent Leaders Action Network:

Thank you for your courage, your vision, and your unwavering dedication to systems change. Your lived experiences, insights, and leadership were the heart of FFL. You not only shaped the work, you defined its purpose. Without your fierce leadership and authentic partnership, none of this would have been possible.

To the Advisory Committee (Past and Present):

Thank you for your thoughtful guidance, reflection, and accountability. Your willingness to navigate complexity and stay engaged made this work possible.

To VIVA Social Impact Partners:

We are deeply grateful for your role as facilitator and guide throughout this process. Your ability to create space where parents felt seen, heard, and respected was essential. You modeled what it looks like to hold power with, not over.

To Our Funders and Learning Partners:

We appreciate your openness, your questions, and your commitment to learning alongside parent leaders. Your participation, even when challenging, was critical to exploring what equitable partnership in philanthropy can truly look like.

SECTION ONE

Introduction & Purpose of the Report



As Funders for Family Leadership (FFL) comes to a close, we offer this Landscape Review as both a reflection and a contribution to the philanthropic sector. While the initiative is ending, the work, relationships, learnings, and impact that emerged over the past several years remain meaningful and worth carrying forward.

This report tells the story of FFL's partnership with the parent leaders of United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN), a network of 36 parent leadership and organizing groups, from its beginnings in 2020 to its close. It is a record of what was tried, learned, and made possible when parent leaders and funders worked together to shift power and build more authentic partnership. Just as importantly, it highlights how this work has influenced funders who participated deeply in the network and how those learnings have begun to shape practices within their own foundations.

The mission of this work has been to transform philanthropic practices so that family leaders are centered and able to guide system change based on their expertise and lived experiences. In the pages ahead, we reflect on what this looked like in practice and share examples of how funders have carried forward lessons from FFL into their internal processes, grantmaking approaches, and relationships with communities.

We share this report not as a final word, but as an invitation. Our hope is that others can learn from our successes and challenges, and that the seeds planted through the partnership between FFL, UPLAN, and committed funders will continue to grow. Whether you are a funder, a parent leader, a facilitator, or ally, we hope you find ideas or reflections that support your own journey.

FFL may be closing the chapter, but the story of equitable parent partnership, and the changes it can inspire within the philanthropic sector, is still unfolding.

SECTION TWO

The Beginning: How it Started



FFL began its partnership with UPLAN in 2020, building on early conversations in 2019 that highlighted a shared need: philanthropy could not meaningfully support family leadership without parents at the table helping shape the work. Funders recognized that parent perspectives were largely missing from funder learning spaces and that bringing parents into those conversations was essential to changing how philanthropy engages, supports, and partners with parents.



“The value of partnership between funders and parents lies in grounding philanthropy in lived experience. Parents bring deep, practical knowledge of what works, what doesn’t, and why—knowledge that data alone can’t capture. When funders partner with parents as co-designers rather than recipients, strategies become more relevant, equitable, and effective. Decisions are better informed, trust is strengthened, and resources are more likely to address root causes rather than surface symptoms.

On a personal level, this work has been affirming and transformative for me. As someone born in another country and raised by a single mother in the USA, I know what it feels like to navigate systems that were not designed with families like mine in mind. Partnering with parents has reinforced the importance of honoring expertise rooted in lived experience and deepened my commitment to shifting power in philanthropy. It has pushed me to listen more closely, challenge traditional practices, and advocate for approaches that center dignity, transparency, and shared accountability. Ultimately, this work has made my role feel not only professional but deeply personal and purposeful.”

—MARGARITA LUCIA ALVAREZ, WILLIAM CASPAR GRAUSTEIN MEMORIAL FUND

In response, FFL and UPLAN set out to co-create the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership, a practical resource to help funders examine their practices, power, and relationships with parents. The urgency of this work deepened in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic and national reckoning on racial injustice exposed long-standing inequities facing Black and Brown families, underscoring the need for philanthropy to act differently.

To support this work, FFL engaged VIVA Social Impact Partners (VIVA) to provide strategic support and facilitate authentic collaboration with UPLAN. Through interviews and conversations with funders and parent leaders, UPLAN, FFL, and VIVA identified what equitable partnership could look like in practice. Together, they developed the self-reflection tool as a living, breathing

resource and a catalyst for ongoing conversation, mutual learning, and change within the philanthropic sector.

In 2021, this work expanded into a Parent-Funder Learning Community with 11 funders and 11 parent leaders from across the country. Participants used the tool to reflect on their own practices while helping refine its next iteration. This process demonstrated that real change requires more than a one-time exchange of feedback; it depends on trust, shared leadership, and continual reflection. It also demonstrated that parents' lived experiences must guide the systems that affect their families.

Throughout this journey, FFL has focused on helping philanthropy move from learning about parents to learning with them. Authentic partnership requires sharing power, what leaders like Rashad Robinson and Alicia Garza describe as, "the ability to make decisions, shape narratives, and hold systems accountable." FFL's vision is for philanthropy to share this power and ensure parents have equal agency in shaping the programs and systems that impact their lives.

This work is ongoing. The path toward equitable partnership is complex and evolving, but as the poet Antonio Machado reminds us, "you make the path as you walk."

SECTION THREE

The Work That Happened



After the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership was created and refined with parent and funder feedback, FFL and UPLAN focused on bringing it to the broader field. This next phase of the work (from 2021 through 2025) was about sharing the tool, elevating parent-funder collaboration in action, and understanding how funder practices began to shift.

REFINING AND RELEASING THE TOOL

After the Parent-Funder Learning Community began in 2021, FFL and UPLAN updated the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership to reflect feedback from parents and funders. These revisions strengthened the tool as a practical guide for examining power, partnership, and equity in philanthropic practice.

In 2022, the team began disseminating the tool more broadly, hoping it would spark conversations and influence change across more foundations.



SHARING THE TOOL WITH THE FIELD

To support broader use, FFL launched a multi-pronged outreach effort that included:

- A national digital campaign that combined direct outreach, an updated website, email communications, and targeted LinkedIn posts and ads.
- Conference presentations, co-led by parents and funders, including:
 - Grantmakers for Education Conference (2022)
 - Grantmakers for Effective Organizations Conference (2023)
 - Early Childhood Funders Collaborative member session (2023)
 - Virtual grantmaker convening (2023)

This outreach required deep preparation and co-presentation between UPLAN parent leaders and funders. Parent leaders traveled to conferences, helped refine talking points, and shared their experiences directly with philanthropic audiences, grounding the tool in real stories and lived expertise. Moreso, the parent leaders and funders built trusted relationships often sharing vulnerabilities and honest opinions, and worked through moments of tension or conflicting ideas. As these relationships grew, so did the practice of FFL funders ceding decision making to the parent leaders.

A NECESSARY PAUSE

However, by 2024, both funding and active member engagement within FFL were dwindling. With limited resources, the initiative paused to reflect on its purpose, sustainability, and future role in the field.

This created an important inflection point: to understand what had shifted in the field since 2020, how funders were applying (or not applying) what they had learned, and whether the network was still the right approach to shifting funder practice.

THE 2025 LEARNING TOUR

In 2025, FFL and UPLAN embarked on a Learning Tour to revisit the question at the heart of the initiative: How is philanthropic practice changing—and where is deeper transformation still needed?

Funders received invitations through the FFL newsletter and were invited to participate in two virtual sessions held in July 2025. Six funders joined, representing foundations that had engaged with the tool in different ways. Five of the six had previously used the tool at least once, adapted it, or integrated parts of it into their internal processes.

The Learning Tour aimed to:

- Understand how funder practices have evolved since the partnership began, including after the release of the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool.
- Identify what has worked well and what challenges remain.
- Highlight what shifts funders are making toward parent power and authentic and equitable partnership.
- Share these reflections with the field, with UPLAN, and with FFL stakeholders to inform future decisions.

SECTION FOUR

The Impact



As a result of the Learning Tour, FFL and UPLAN have prepared the following findings. These findings are organized into two sections: 1) the impact that the FFL-UPLAN partnership had on the individual parent leaders and funders that were closely involved; 2) how funders have individually applied lessons from the Self-Reflection Tool and from their participation in the FFL network to their own work. These findings are not intended to be an exhaustive list of the efforts and practice changes that have shifted across the entire field, but they do provide a glimpse into where the field is at present.

UPLAN & FFL IMPACT

From the start of the partnership between UPLAN and FFL, the goal was always to have an authentic partnership. However, the line between having the goal and actualizing that partnership was not always straight and clear. Like all relationships, there were high and low moments; however, the time and care invested into building mutual trust and respect was absolutely worth the journey.

Defining Authentic Partnership

A critical outcome of this work was that FFL and UPLAN had clarity about what it means to be in authentic partnership and what it takes. This, in turn, allowed each individual involved to take those learnings and bring them into their own work outside of the core partnership. Some of the key components to authentic partnership have included:



1. Starting with relationships.

Every meeting between the funders and parent leaders began with dedicated time to hearing how each individual was doing. That meant holding space for both the high points and low points in people's lives. Baby pictures were shared, milestones were celebrated, condolences and comforting words were offered, and grace was always given if people needed to take care of themselves. In other words, no one shied away from sharing the things that made them human. Developing relationships takes time, and that's the point. Build time for these conversations in your meeting agendas and approach them with genuine interest and care.

“I believe that the parents and the funders involved in this project each learned a lot about the other’s perspective. As a parent, I learned so much about the internal structure of foundations. There are boards and upper management that make a lot of the decisions. The program officers can give us, as parents, a lot of information. Because of what I learned about how foundations work, I have been able to be a bridge to other parents and share some of that knowledge with them.

And as parents, we brought our knowledge, connections, and personal experience in communities. I think the funders learned a lot from us. There were different communication styles, different ways to say the same thing. But it is possible to understand each other. There’s a need on the funder side to build skills to better understand people across cultural differences.

I met several program officers who are investing their foundation’s funds in community as fairly and equitably as they can. I have appreciated these relationships, and I have respect for the work they are doing. I am grateful for this experience.”

— MUNA HUSSEIN, PARENT LEADER

2. Parents led.

The inherent power difference between funders and parent leaders when in a shared space was explicitly named. In response, FFL made a deliberate commitment to pause before making assumptions or taking action. “Have we asked the parents...” became the norm. More importantly than merely soliciting input, funders listened to parent leaders and used that input to inform and guide decisions and actions. This approach required funders to be extremely flexible in responding to shifts in ideas and concepts, or changes to timelines and pacing.

3. Transparency and Trust.

What’s a relationship without trust? Parents learned to trust that funders were acting in the best interests of the partnership, and funders learned to trust that parents could engage thoughtfully with difficult truths. For example, when funding limitations meant certain ideas were no longer feasible, the funders shared



those barriers openly and timely. On the flip side, when parents had strong concerns about a proposal, they voiced their concerns and pushed back. No information was withheld, and the relationship allowed for candid, and even challenging, discussions.

“For me, the value of partnership with Funders and Families brings two words to mind: understanding and transparency! For so long parents have felt as if their stories/struggles did not matter and that they were not being heard! We felt that Funders only wanted those check box parents who agreed with what they wanted us to agree with them on and then would say “look we invite parents to the table/spaces, yet the parents with the true struggles and hardships weren’t invited to the table because it wasn’t aligned with what Funders wanted to hear. Partnering with FFL and meeting so many Funders changed my perception because I saw how intentional the Funders were to really step in and help those communities and the organizations within these underserved communities.

Trust was gained on both sides, and with that trust parent organizations became more open to share without feeling there would be backlash from the Funders who were helping to provide the financial resources that were needed in order to see the successes within these areas of concern.

For me, this collaboration was both humbling and empowering. The power dynamic that I felt was gone. I learned that some funders were just as worried that they wouldn’t be accepted by parents/communities and they wanted to know why and in turn were intentional about letting parents know that they truly valued us, our experiences and looked at us as equal partners in this work. Knowing this, it empowered us to reach out to parent leaders and encouraged them to tell their stories because we were working with Funders who wanted us to know that they truly cared and wanted to know the best ways and practices they could use so parents would continue to work with them in whatever capacity was needed, and why the FFL Tool Kit came to be!!

It was a pleasure meeting everyone and knowing that when we first met we were strangers and we are leaving as partners in this work. I hope to continue to stay in touch with everyone.”

— SARA MORRISON, PARENT LEADER

4. Accountability.

Over the years, the partnership pursued numerous collaborative projects. This meant there were often expectations established between funders and parents about what needed to get done, how work would advance, and when it would be completed. There were also expectations about how the group would collaborate and work as a team. When expectations were not met, or harm was done in the course of the collaboration, accountability and ownership were necessary.

There were also important learnings about relationships within a parent-funder dynamic. As funders' roles shifted over time, some who played significant roles in the partnership phased out of the network. Though parents expressed at the start of the collaboration they did not want relationships to be transactional, without clear pathways for continued collaboration, that's exactly what happened. Both funders and parents recognized their shared responsibility in maintaining genuine connections beyond the life of a specific project.

5. Valuing Parents.

Funders who were active in leading the partnership between FFL and UPLAN also took responsibility to ensure that the parent leaders were adequately resourced for their time and expertise. When initiating scopes of work, UPLAN was asked to develop budgets that were accurate of the true cost for advancing the work and ensuring that parent compensation at rates similar to consultants were included.

These learnings and practices helped to ensure that an authentic partnership was established and cultivated.

FUNDER PRACTICE SHIFTS

Each funder involved in the Learning Tour was invited to share their foundation's journey with parent partnership, from where it started through where they are today. The participants were asked to highlight how their foundation has used its funding, influence, and platform to advance parent leadership or encouraged the broader philanthropic community to share power with parents.

While there were a number of efforts attempted, several themes emerged about what has been effective and enabled foundations to do deeper work in community:

“Engaging with Funders for Family Leadership has been both affirming and transformative for my work with the Healthy & Equitable Futures (HEF) strategy at the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. FFL has created a rare and necessary space where funders are encouraged to lead with humility, listen deeply to families, and center lived experience as expertise.

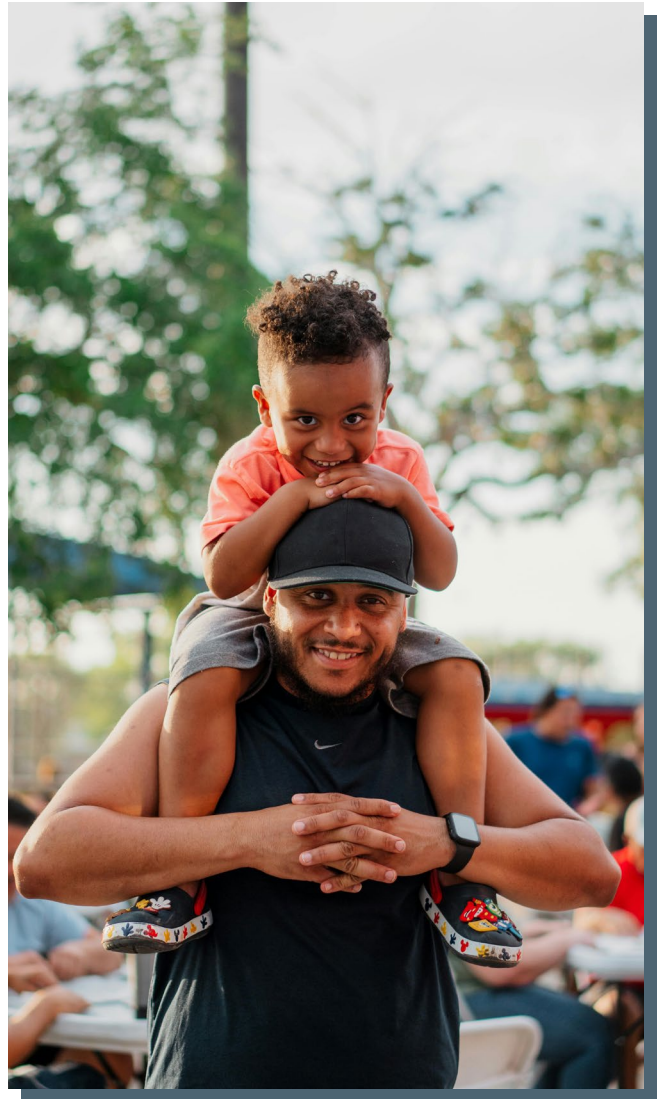
As a program officer, the lessons and practices surfaced through FFL have directly shaped how I frame HEF's three core levers, especially family leadership. They have sharpened my lens around accountability, equity, and sustainability. Most importantly, FFL has helped me put into practice the belief that parents and caregivers are not just stakeholders, they are architects of lasting change.”

— MAURICE HASKINS, GREATER ROCHESTER HEALTH FOUNDATION

Incorporating Deeper Parent Engagement in Grantmaking

Participating funders highlighted that over the last several years, their foundations have shifted from simply information gathering from families to sharing various levels of power with parent leaders. Examples of this practice shift ranged from having parent leaders serve on participatory grantmaking for select grant initiatives, to institutionalizing family advisory boards for programs, with one foundation having parent leaders serve on their paid staff team.

For some, trusted community consultants were essential in facilitating the design and implementation of parent partnership efforts. These consultants focused on laying the groundwork for authentic relationship building and establishing necessary infrastructure for sustaining equitable parent power sharing. Another key to success was either seating new board members and/or spending time cultivating mental model shifts with board members so there was a culture across the foundation of investment in sharing power with parents. One foundation is in active dialogue about having parent leaders join the foundation's board, demonstrating a growing recognition of the value that parent leaders bring to philanthropic work.



Most of the funders in the Learning Tour highlighted how the ideas and considerations in FFL's Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership helped spark internal dialogue and an examination of operational practices or culture shifts that could get in the way of doing the work. An example of this was when a funder realized that their compensation of parent leaders was hindered by their internal technology and operational practices. The foundation invested in training for staff to navigate new IT systems so that direct payments to parent leaders were streamlined and better met parents' needs.

Allocating Intentional Time for Reflection, Feedback, and Healing in Parent-Funder Relationships

Across the foundations involved in the Learning Tour, there was a key message that time is necessary in a process with parents for learning, working through differences, and repairing when there has been harm done. In other words, the foundations highlighted that philanthropy needs to learn to sometimes go slow to move fast. Key to the partnership's success included designing initiatives or processes with parents that intentionally built in time to pause, reflect, and gather feedback, ensuring readiness before moving forward. This reflective approach often brings up challenges that require additional pauses and adjustments along the way.

Establishing Shared Language and Communication Practices to Improve Understanding and Access

The funders involved in the Learning Tour also emphasized the importance of not only building relationships that are people-first, but the need for establishing shared language and communication practices. In order to move through dialogue, there needs to be a mutual understanding of terms or ideas, especially around philanthropy, rather than assuming that everyone interprets them the same way. The partnership benefited from level setting and transparency at the on-set, including clear communication about the conditions needed from both funders and parent leaders to thrive in the work. Remember, this takes time and intention.

While philanthropy wants to learn from families about their lived experiences, it is equally important to recognize that parent leaders also want to learn from philanthropy. This mutual learning is fundamental to an authentic partnership and requires time and transparency with parent leaders about how philanthropic systems function and how decisions are made. Honesty, particularly about the constraints and barriers within philanthropy, is essential, so that when parent leaders lean into ideas or aspirations that are not attainable, there is shared understanding and trust about why. As one funder noted, practices that once felt impossible - such as allowing parent partners access to internal files without being Foundation staff - have, over time, become standard practice.

Communication practices are not only necessary to establish at the start of the partnership, but require regular attention and feedback loops. Evaluating the relationship and communication practices routinely is critical to mitigating larger conflict and crises that can slow down forward momentum.

Overall, funders expressed their foundations being in a very different place in their parent partnership work compared to the early years of joining FFL or engaging with the Self-Reflection Tool. As parent leader Rosazlia Grillier reflected, the journey was transformative: "I entered this endeavour with a desire to help shift the sometimes distant interactions between funders and the organizations that they were supporting into partnerships with productive relationships that worked together in a way that caused everyone to win.

As we embark on the next leg of this journey I applaud the brave organizations who had the courage to try and the success that you have had so far by centering the voices of those most impacted by the issues you are supporting has proven what I knew was possible! Thank you to Greater Rochester Health Foundation, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund for the long haul dedication; Rock star accolades to Robert Woods Johnson for taking a leap of faith and showing how intentionality in implementing The Philanthropic Self Reflection Tool could really take this work to the next level. I appreciate all of the foundations who have used the tool in various ways. I so look forward to what's next."

SECTION FIVE

The Challenges



Over the years there has been significant progress made to authentically partner with parent leaders both within FFL and some of the philanthropic organizations that participated in the Learning Tour. However, this journey was not without challenges and lessons learned. The following section highlights first what foundations have expressed are the challenges in doing this work, and then what FFL has found to be stumbling blocks.

FOUNDATION LEARNINGS

One of the most persistent challenges faced throughout this work was the structural and institutional limitations within philanthropic organizations. Despite a shared commitment to more equitable practices, many funders encountered internal barriers such as apprehensive boards, and limiting internal operational policies and procedures. Some boards have a difficult time understanding how parent leadership and parent power building is tied to their focus areas and strategies. Power building with parent leaders depends on trust - specifically, trust in parents to identify the issues that matter most and to help shape the solutions to address them. When parents focus on issues that, on the surface, seem different from the boards' priorities, it can be difficult to find alignment. One funder highlighted that while partnering with community has become a more common practice in philanthropy, the current funding landscape and political climate has led many foundations to narrow their focus. When foundations struggle to make these connections and areas of alignment or communicate the impact of power building with their boards, they will continue to experience challenges to embedding deeper power sharing practices.



These dynamics often constrained some of the foundations' ability to fully engage in the work, making it difficult to move from intention to action. In some cases, these barriers even reinforced the very power imbalances the initiative aimed to address.

FFL LEARNINGS

While the Learning Tour was focused on hearing from other funders in the field, it was also an opportunity to reflect internally at FFL about the networks' learnings through the years. The following captures FFL's stumbling blocks and learning moments that may help other initiatives looking to do similar work.

Adapting to the Field

One key learning reflected a broader shift within philanthropy. FFL emerged at a time when there were few spaces in the field focused on partnership and practice with parent leaders. Six years later, that landscape has changed. Longstanding networks and collaboratives are now engaging in these concepts, and funders have built their own partnership and power-building practices. As a result, funders found opportunities for reflection and learning within their own local ecosystems. One funder shared that they now look to their grantee partners as teachers, listening and learning from those who model what authentic partnership looks like in practice and the impact it can have. As the field evolved, the need for a separate learning community became less imperative. In this shifting context, FFL missed an opportunity to grow and adapt alongside the field by clarifying its unique value as a standalone network.

Sharing the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool

The Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership was envisioned as a dynamic resource to guide funders in partnering more authentically with family leaders. While it was well received by some, it did not gain consistent traction across the field. Upon reflection and dialogue from the funders that participated in the Learning Tour, FFL realized that in many instances, the toolkit was treated as a standalone product rather than as a tool that required ongoing dialogue, reflection, and facilitation. One funder noted that while the ideas in the tool remain relevant and necessary, the way they are shared must evolve as the field's thinking and practice around partnership and power sharing also evolves. Without intentional relationship building, ongoing dialogue, story sharing and follow through, the tool's potential to drive meaningful, widespread change remains largely unrealized.

These stumbling blocks contributed to disengagement from membership, ultimately leading to diminished funding to sustain the network.

Finally, there was a lack of consistent recognition and celebration of the contributions made by the parent leaders. Although they were central to the work, their impact was not always made visible, nor were their efforts consistently acknowledged within the broader narrative of the initiative. This omission stands in contrast to the core values of FFL and represented a missed opportunity to model the kind of equitable partnership the initiative sought to promote.

These shortcomings do not diminish the progress that was made. Rather, they provide critical insights for future efforts. They serve as a reminder that meaningful systems change requires more than frameworks and resources. It also demands an ongoing commitment to addressing internal challenges, building authentic partnerships, and remaining accountable to those most impacted by the systems we aim to transform.

SECTION SIX

What Now



These insights highlight the work that continues to be necessary to sustain and deepen equitable partnership in philanthropy.

The Funders for Family Leadership experience highlighted that meaningful parent-funder relationships require intentionality, clarity, and humility. Funders and parents gained mutual insights, recognizing the importance of power sharing, which is now increasingly discussed and prioritized across philanthropic spaces. Successful approaches involve deep listening, authentic collaboration, and creating structures that center parent leadership rather than tokenizing input. At the same time, the work surfaced challenges: when roles, goals, or decision-making authority are unclear, even well-intentioned funders can inadvertently cause harm, perpetuating the very systems they aim to change. Parents' reflections such as feeling their ideas were taken and implemented without continued partnership underscore that trust, accountability, and ongoing engagement are essential for this work to be equitable and effective.

WHAT THE FIELD NEEDS NOW

Across the Learning Tour discussions, there were consistent recommendations and needs expressed for the field at large:

More storytelling and communication.

Funders want the opportunity to hear about the impact that is happening across communities when parents are centered and have power and leadership in philanthropic practice. In order to learn from others to improve their own practice, and also shift the mindsets of apprehensive investors and boards, funders need to hear what is being tried and working as well as the steps it took to get there. This also places responsibility on funders to invest in storytelling and broader communications that uplift successes and support adaptation of this work across foundations and communities. Having stronger visibility of examples of parent partnership across the sector will help to shift the culture of philanthropy, which is fundamental to systems change.

More cross sharing of resources.

Some foundations shared that they continue to learn how to engage in parent partnership work through their relationships with grantees and the parent leaders those organizations support. Some foundations have developed their own tools and guidelines, which are now being used to support broader integration of this work across their institutions. Foundations must continue sharing these practices and resources not only internally, but also with philanthropic peers and grantees who are also working to advance this work effectively.

SECTION SEVEN

Closing the Chapter and What Comes Next

After years of building partnerships, tools, and practices to center parents in philanthropy, the Funders for Family Leadership network is closing this chapter. The decision reflects a combination of factors, including limited funding and declining participation from funders. While this marks the end of this network, the work of advancing equitable parent partnership is far from over. Many challenges remain, and the lessons learned provide a foundation for future efforts to embed parent leadership in the philanthropic sector.

Although FFL is concluding, the work can continue in new ways with fresh energy, ideas, and partnerships. Foundations, parent leaders, and community organizations can build on the relationships, insights, and frameworks developed through the network and the Self-Reflection Tool, taking what worked and adapting it to evolving needs. The commitment to authentic parent engagement, equity, and shared power is ongoing, and the field is ripe for experimentation, learning, and innovation.

The Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership remains a key resource for funders who are ready to engage in ongoing self-reflection and growth. Traditional philanthropic practices often operate within systems of power and privilege, and even well-intentioned approaches can have unintended impacts on the communities doing the work on the ground. Designed to spark dialogue, reflection, and practice change, the tool is intended to be a living resource that funders can continue to use, adapt, and refine. Even as FFL concludes, funders and parent partners can engage with the tool to examine their practices, deepen parent collaboration, and create meaningful, lasting impact in their communities.

APPENDIX A

FUNDERS FOR FAMILY LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT AND WEBINAR RECORDINGS

Access the full Funders for Family Leadership Toolkit and recordings of past FFL webinars, which cover key topics such as engaging parent leaders in evaluation, co-designing programs with parent leaders, and building power with families.

Toolkit: <https://fundersforfamilyleadership.org/philanthropic-self-reflection-tool/>

Webinars: <https://fundersforfamilyleadership.org/archived-events/>

APPENDIX B

TIMELINE OF FUNDERS FOR FAMILY LEADERSHIP

A chronological overview of key milestones, events, and activities from the launch of Funders for Family Leadership in 2020 through its sunset.

2016

- The Hagedorn Foundation and Annie E. Casey Foundation provide grants to NEO Philanthropy to be a fiscal sponsor for their informal funders' group.

2017

- Annie E. Casey, Peppercorn, Hagedorn and W.K.Kellogg foundations formally found the funders network, with NEO Philanthropy as the fiscal sponsor.
- The first annual convening is held, naming the network: "Funders' Group on Parent Organizing, Family Engagement and Leadership Development".

2018

- An annual convening is held to set priorities.

2019

- Consultant, VIVA Social Impact Partners, is brought on to develop programming for the funder network.
- A free webinar series is launched in the summer.
- The annual convening is held in the fall to develop a roadmap for the network. The network sets a goal to authentically partner with parents so that they are at the table to guide philanthropic practice.

2020

- UPLAN becomes a formal consultant to the Funders Group and conducts interviews with funders and parent leaders.
- UPLAN interview findings and research are used to develop the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership.

2021

- The network is renamed to “Funders for Family Leadership” with a new mission, vision, and website.
- The Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership is launched and tested with a parent-funder learning community of 11 parent leaders and 11 funders, and updated with their feedback.
- FFL continues to host member calls and learning events.

2022

- The revised Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership is shared widely with the philanthropic field through an outreach campaign.
- UPLAN and FFL present at the Grantmakers for Education Conference.

2023

- UPLAN and FFL present at the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations Conference.
- UPLAN and FFL partner with the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative to host a webinar on the Philanthropic Self-Reflection Tool for Equitable Parent Partnership.
- Outreach is done to members about sustainability of the network.

2024

- With limited resources, the initiative is paused to reflect on its purpose, sustainability, and future role in the field.

2025

- A Learning Tour is launched to understand where the field is now regarding parent partnership and family leadership.

2026

- A Landscape Review is developed to share findings from the Learning Tour.
- FFL prepares to sunset.

APPENDIX C

CASE STUDIES

In addition to those who attended the Learning Tour, we have also seen a number of funders implement new ways of working that share power with parents. These diverse experiences, highlighted in this section, demonstrate the range of changes taking place across the field.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) made significant changes to its grantmaking processes and staffing structure to better fund local, grassroots, and parent-led organizations, not just in its home state of New Jersey, but nationally. For many years, RWJF worked primarily through “grass-tops” advocacy groups and intermediary organizations to distribute its annual grantmaking, a model that was efficient but did not always equitably center the voice of communities that the foundation’s grantmaking attempted to reach. . In recent years, they have begun exploring how to form deeper relationships with caregivers themselves, local organizing groups and direct service providers in ways that support parent-led work more directly. Rather than automatically channeling large grants through intermediaries, RWJF now asks whether direct funding is possible and whether intermediaries add value or reinforce inequities.

“We are trying to be truer to what we are seeing and hearing, rather than defaulting to traditional funder excuses.” - Mike White, Program Officer

Additionally, RWJF is exploring new ways to embed parent voices into its work. The Foundation’s Healthy Children and Families Portfolio engaged a Family Advisory Committee for over two years to more equitably guide programming and test assumptions about strategies, tactics, and field signals. In addition, RWJF is engaging with new convening tables who coordinate parent-led organizing across various parts of our economy and society. Together, these efforts make space for a more community-informed approach to parent and caregiver engagement and grantmaking. By integrating parent leaders’ insights into agenda-setting, RWJF aims to strengthen its influence on economic solutions and systems that affect families.

The Foundation also supports organizations working to build parent voice and racial equity into their work and provides technical assistance when requested. This includes providing technical assistance to grantees looking for ways to increase their impact while staying true to their values, equitable evaluation practices and expanding grant opportunities access for groups that are historically overlooked. Through these efforts, the Foundation is aligning its structures, culture, and funding models with its vision of shared power and authentic partnership with caregivers and communities.

Greater Rochester Health Foundation

Evolving dialogue about racial equity and the importance of holistic child health and well-being led the Greater Rochester Health Foundation to launch the Healthy and Equitable Futures (HEF) initiative in 2021. A long-term initiative, HEF aims to improve health and well-being for Black and Latino children ages 0 to 8 in Monroe County, NY by centering racial equity in the child- and family-serving system, using three main levers to propel change: advancing family leadership, providing social-emotional supports, and creating representative and inclusive systems.

Through the advancing family leadership lever, HEF has increased capacity of grantee organizations to partner with families, providing parents training and supports to build leadership and advocacy skills. Partners continue to learn and gather resources to better engage families by setting up formal procedures for family leadership as well as training staff on how to work with families effectively. Healthy and Equitable Futures has encouraged changes in organizational policies and practices for partnering with parents and families, leading local organizations to implement policies that have increased the number of parents in decision-making roles. Each HEF partner compensates parent leaders to advise parent partnership efforts across the organization and other parent leaders to facilitate collaboration between HEF and the partner organization.

Healthy and Equitable Futures Progress and Impact:

- Parent leaders led the interview and selection process for a new HEF program evaluator
- A parent leader was hired by the Health Foundation as the HEF program officer in 2023
- Parent participation is included in hiring and interview processes across several grantee partners
- Partner organizations have integrated parent advisory boards or parent and consumer representation on their boards
- Partner organizations have created systems to compensate family leaders for their contributions
- Parent leaders chaired local community councils, served on statewide councils, and convened and led workgroups
- Parent leaders defined the criteria, progress indicators, and goals for the 2025-2027 phase of the HEF initiative

Children thrive when their families have a real voice in shaping the systems that affect their lives. When parents hold meaningful power, organizations change in ways that better serve children and communities. Parent leadership shifts conversations, and parent liberation transforms systems. As families move from being heard to being decision-makers, they begin to influence budgets, strategies, and community priorities. The shift underway in Rochester demonstrates that liberation is not abstract -- it is exemplified as parents lead councils, shape curricula, secure grants, and build spaces where their voices are essential to every decision.

William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund (The Memorial Fund) identified a lack of parent and community perspectives in its program strategies, particularly from historically marginalized voices. To improve transparency and accountability, The Memorial Fund decided to establish a Community Advisory Council (CAC) as a forum for ongoing partnerships with parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders.

The Memorial Fund had been grappling with critical questions about community engagement. Program Officer Margarita Lucia Alvarez shared: "How do we create a group that is representative of those most impacted by racism and poverty? What structures best ensure that lived experience meaningfully informs strategy, not just feedback?" Questions like these led them to adopt a CAC approach.

The Memorial Fund hired an experienced consultant, Alexis Harewood, to co-design governance structures, recruitment strategies, onboarding processes, and evaluation tools for the CAC. Early learnings revealed that intentional recruitment and clear role definition are essential to building trust with parents and community members. The Memorial Fund also found that community members bring critical systems-level insights when provided with adequate context and support. Additionally, the CAC development process highlighted that internal staff capacity and readiness are just as important as external engagement for sustaining parent-centered work.

Moving forward, the Fund envisions the CAC as a core component of its strategy and community engagement. The CAC will provide ongoing input into program design, grantmaking priorities, and evaluation. Rather than being consulted occasionally, parents and families are engaged as ongoing partners. WCGMF is also continuing to build the internal systems and staff capacity needed to sustain and deepen family partnerships over time.