

CO-CREATING A STATE AGENCY PARENT CABINET

Elevating Parent Voice –
Creating Authentic Partnerships



A TOOLKIT TO ASSIST STATES AND AGENCIES

Acknowledgements

This toolkit was developed from 2023–2024 by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC), the CT OEC Parent Cabinet Design Team, and some key partners who helped to contribute to the toolkit.



Please find more on the design team members at ctoec.org/parent-cabinet/about-pc and the Parent Cabinet at ctoec.org/parent-cabinet

This toolkit was made possible thanks to an amazing group of dedicated parents and community leaders who contributed their time, energy, knowledge, experience, insight, passion, and commitment to make sure the CT OEC Parent Cabinet was designed with parent voice and personal experiences.

Parent Cabinet

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Letter from OEC Commissioner



It has been such a pleasure to watch the development of our Parent Cabinet. One reason it has been so special is that the process has been rooted in the idea that we trust parents and rely on parents to build a more responsive early childhood ecosystem in Connecticut. Our Parent Cabinet was co-created by parents.

It took longer than if we handpicked members and handed them over a playbook – but the outcome of co-creation has paid off with the final product.

We couldn't say exactly what it would look like, but we knew we were not hearing enough from parents. The child care system looked nothing like what parents needed, and all the voices were around what the child care directors and workers who were all organized, needed; not what families needed. So, we knew we needed parents to have some structure where they, too, could have a say, so the system might reflect better what parents needed, rather than people who are trying to hold on to what they have.

When I first got involved in early childhood policy making, it was because my own one-year-old daughter experienced so much teacher turnover in her infant room, and I knew that reliable relationships are critical for child development. So, I joined a group of child care workers and parents to call for worthy wages for child care workers in Connecticut. This brought me to my first protest and the State Capitol for the first time. Through that process I learned that parent voices really matter. And as my children grew and I had concerns about local education policies in West Hartford, I ran for School Board and was elected, and able to bring that early childhood advocacy and policy experience to the public schools.

As I watched the first cohort of Parent Cabinet members build the Cabinet and expand their own development as changemakers, it was not surprising to see them also taking on more and different roles in their communities. I heard about the various state and local committees they had joined, and the ways they were recruiting other parents to engage and work for community change.

As Commissioner, I experienced firsthand the Cabinet's impact on OEC as we worked to grow the early childhood system and make a 5-year plan for Connecticut for child care. This has led to legislative changes and has been a motivating force to help establish an Early Childhood Education Endowment to expand access to child care for CT's children and families.

We sit in our offices and make decisions that seem logical, but then talk to parents and find out it's not what they need. Including parents with personal experience changes expectations and planning based on what families need and what works best for them – reducing their stress, and helping children and families in their day-to-day lives.

Parent engagement at the governance and agency level in a state has a visible impact in Connecticut. Parents improve agency responsiveness to family needs and it also drives policy change at the highest level.

I look forward to the Cabinet's role continuing to evolve, and OEC will continue to trust parents and listen to parents through this very effective Parent Cabinet process.



Commissioner Beth Bye

Executive Summary

This toolkit is designed to help states and organizations elevate parent voice^[1] and develop authentic collaboration with families through the co-creation of an advisory body like a Parent Cabinet. It provides lessons learned and tools used by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood. When we say “parent,” we refer to all caregivers, guardians, and any who are caring for a child in a parenting role. We have incorporated the voices of the Parent Cabinet Design Team, which is a dynamic group of parent and community leaders who helped with the formation, as well as OEC staff, throughout the toolkit. Their voices illustrate the experiences of Design Team members, lessons learned, and recommendations for establishing a strong Parent Cabinet.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) is an executive branch state agency that oversees programs and services that help young children and families.

The OEC’s Parent Cabinet is a diverse, parent-led 15-member statutory statewide advisory committee [P.A. 23-160, Sec.40 (27)]. The Cabinet seeks to build strong connections; listen intentionally; and partner with Connecticut families of young children, communities, and OEC to incorporate the expertise of all parents throughout the early childhood system to ensure family-driven equitable policies and programs. Parent Cabinet members:

- Offer guidance to OEC on how to improve programs, policies, and laws related to young children and their families
- Elevate the needs of families from all backgrounds from across Connecticut — from parents and others — so their needs are heard at the highest levels of state government
- Help OEC to form lasting and effective partnerships with families
- Increase awareness around OEC services and supports
- Increase their own knowledge of early childhood supports and further develop their leadership skills

In its first three years, the Parent Cabinet has:

Shared firsthand experiences and raised parent voice to the OEC.

Given feedback on the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care to shape a 5-year plan for child care in CT.

Presented or spoken at multiple local, state, and national conferences.

Served on advisory panels, like the Birth to Three System Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC), OEC Strategic Planning External Steering Committee, the Early Childhood Cabinet, the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care, and more.

^[1] Parent voice refers to the inclusion of parents’ perspectives, experiences, and recommendations in the development and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their children and families.



“I got to work hand-in-hand with some other dedicated parent leaders who had similar mindsets as me. They wanted to make a change.”

- Ruth-Ann (Inaugural Parent Cabinet member)

The toolkit includes specific **action steps** agencies can take to co-design, form, and institute a Parent Cabinet. These one-page summaries are included at the end of each section on pages 29, 45, and 61.

Key lessons learned from the establishment of the Cabinet include:

- **Time and staff support.** The co-creation process (both the design and start-up of the Cabinet) took much time and staff support. This included evening meetings; one-on-one check-ins with members; communications via multiple methods; time at meetings for relationship-building and discussions that engaged all members; and the time and ability OEC staff needed to translate parent feedback into actionable items for OEC.
- **Staggering terms.** After the first group was onboarded and in the role, we quickly realized staggering would be needed, and needed to identify a process to do this thoughtfully to minimize any gaps in the work, and ensure a smoother transition to learn from those currently in the role.
- **Frequent meetings and touch-points.** Originally, the Parent Cabinet planned to meet quarterly. However, this was changed to virtual monthly meetings to build strong relationships among members, and ensure that parent voice was reflected in the many OEC initiatives and services. In addition, OEC staff added one-on-one meetings to offer individual support to Parent Cabinet members.
- **Parents driving the agenda.** Parent Cabinet members help co-facilitate meetings to develop their leadership skills and share power. Using data from monthly reports and meeting evaluation forms, OEC staff learn what parents want to have as topics at future meetings. Meeting agendas are carefully crafted with parent facilitators to not overload the meetings or just have OEC staff talking. Meetings are designed to be collaborative, with opportunities to share and hear from members.
- **State-Local communications.** Connections must be made at the local level for the state to truly understand what is happening at the local level, what the implications are when state policies are passed, and what issues different communities are facing. Parent Cabinet members can be key players in making these connections.

- **Educate members on advocacy role.** It was important for OEC to be transparent and honest with Parent Cabinet members around the role of an executive office state agency like OEC that reports to the Governor and adheres to guidelines regarding advocacy. This applies to the Parent Cabinet as an advisory body – members discussed how to take the “Parent Cabinet hat” off and put the “parent hat” on if advocating to the legislature.
- **Connecting activities to the mission and desired outcomes.** The Parent Cabinet has drafted a logic model to help clarify the Cabinet’s desired outcomes, and ensure that outcomes align with its mission and activities. The logic model can also be used to assess progress in achieving its mission.
- **Clear parameters.** It’s important to be clear as to what parents will be able to give feedback on or help co-develop. There may be certain activities or programs where there is a limited role for parent feedback (e.g., grants with strict federal requirements).
- **Valuing parent leadership with funding and stipends.** Participants agreed that the funding and stipends were critical to the Cabinet’s success. OEC partnered with the Connecticut Children’s Alliance to pay member stipends. The Children’s Alliance utilized Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) funds to compensate parents. In addition, the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) helped fund much of the work of the Parent Cabinet, and highlighted the importance of family voice and leadership on a national level. The OEC lead for PDG funding, Lorna Thomas-Farquharson, was essential in ensuring the use of PDG for Parent Cabinet, and championed family voice throughout the development and launch of the Cabinet



Inaugural OEC Parent Cabinet Members pictured with OEC Staff and Elaine Zimmerman (ACF Region 1 Administrator)

I. Introduction

Who Should Use This Toolkit?

This toolkit can be used by a staff person or group from a:



State Agency



Municipal Committee



Town



Decision-making entity that impacts the lives of families in any way

This toolkit is designed to help states and organizations elevate parent voice and develop authentic collaboration with families through the co-creation of an advisory body like a Parent Cabinet. It provides lessons learned and tools used by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood. This toolkit captures stories from those who engaged in the co-design process to help instill lessons learned to truly have parents^[2] as equal partners in developing and launching a state-agency advisory body.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is intended to:

- Spark ideas and new ways of thinking about how to partner with families
- Elevate the importance of having parents and families co-lead the design process from the beginning
- Challenge state agencies and organizations to think about how to bring family voice, and personal experience into their work to help inform its practices to improve outcomes for families
- Highlight the necessary components of a co-creation process and the benefits of this approach
- Spark action

The toolkit is organized as follows:

SECTION I	provides background on the Connecticut context.
SECTION II	describes how the Parent Cabinet was designed via a Design Team that co-created the Cabinet with OEC staff.
SECTION III	describes the formation of the Parent Cabinet.

^[2] Please note that when we use the term “parents” or “families” throughout the Toolkit, we include caregivers, guardians, and all who care for and raise children in a parenting role.

SECTION IV

describes planning for impact and sustainability of the Cabinet, and shares key practices and lessons learned from the process.

SECTION II, III, & IV

each conclude with a one-page list of key Action Steps.

APPENDICES

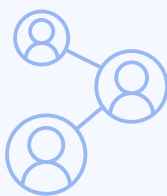
include definitions of key terms, frameworks, and articles utilized in the design process; and OEC and Parent Cabinet tools and documents.

We have incorporated the voices of the Parent Cabinet Design Team, which is a dynamic group of parent and community leaders who helped with the formation, as well as OEC staff, throughout the toolkit. Their voices illustrate the experiences of Design Team members, lessons learned, and recommendations for establishing a strong Parent Cabinet.

How We Got Here: Connecticut's Frameworks & Practices on Parent Leadership & Family Engagement

Connecticut has a long history of engaging families, and promoting parent leadership and development that have laid the foundation for the development of the Parent Cabinet:

- **Parent Leadership Training Institute:** Connecticut is home to the nationally recognized Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), a 20-week experience that builds personal leadership, civic engagement, and trains parents on understanding elements of local and state government. PLTI is coordinated and led in CT by the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, and Opportunity, and has been implemented throughout the country by the [National Parent Leadership Institute](#) (NPLI). More than 10,000 parents have graduated from PLTI since 1992.



Parent Leadership is the capacity for parents to interact within society with purpose and positive outcomes for children

– PLTI

- **CT Parent Trust Fund:** PLTI and other evidence-based curricula including Parents Supporting Educational Excellence (Parents SEE) and People Empowering People (PEP) are funded and implemented in communities across Connecticut through the Parent Trust Fund Request for Proposal (RFP) process and other

funding sources. The Parent Trust Fund is the first family civics initiative focused on investing in building the civic capacity and leadership skills of parents to improve the health, safety, and learning outcomes of children. This line item was legislated by the Connecticut General Assembly in 2001, and is administered by the [CT State Department of Education](#).

- **CT Two-Generational Initiative (2Gen):** In 2015, Connecticut became the first state in the nation to pass legislation codifying a 2Gen initiative in statute. 2Gen’s innovative whole-family approach creates opportunities and addresses the needs of two generations at once. It helps children and parents get the education, training, and socio-economic supports they need to succeed; and it allows parents the ability to pass on economic security to their children. 2Gen relies on collaboration across agencies and sectors, data sharing, and leveraging existing resources to drive down costs and promote economic success. The 2Gen approach also works to empower parents as civic leaders and partners in our work as members of the [2Gen Advisory Board](#).
- **CT’s Full, Equal, and Equitable Partnership with Families Framework:** Together, the CT State Department of Education (CSDE), the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), and the Connecticut Early Childhood Funders Collaborative (ECFC), joined with parents, educators, and community members in a year-long process to co-create a common definition for advancing family engagement efforts across the state. The result was a [definition of family engagement](#) that represents the shared commitment of multiple stakeholders:



Family Engagement is a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children’s learning and development from birth through college and career.

Connecticut’s definition of family engagement and co-creation process have been featured in national convenings and publications. For example, it was adopted as the guiding definition of family engagement in a new Scholastic publication called [Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships & Implications for Practice](#) (2022) and in the Carnegie Corporation’s report [Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#) (2021).

- **Head Start:** Head Start programs promote the school readiness of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from income-eligible families. Core to the Head Start model is the partnership and engagement of families – through Head Start Policy Councils and the [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework](#). The Policy Council is a group of Head Start parents and community

members who help lead and make decisions about their program. Policy Council members are elected by the parents of children enrolled in the program. The Parent and Community Engagement Framework is a roadmap that can be used in program-wide strategic planning, program design and management, continuous learning and improvement activities, as well as with governing bodies and parent groups. It can help all staff members understand their role in systemic, integrated, and comprehensive family engagement, and to coordinate their efforts with others. Connecticut has a strong network of Head Start programs, serving approximately 6,000 families each year.

Who We Are: CT Office of Early Childhood (OEC)

In 2014, the CT Office of Early Childhood (OEC) was created through Public Act 14-39 as a state agency in the executive branch. This legislation mandated improved coordination among all state public agencies touching the lives of young children, and offered a long-awaited opportunity for creating systemic improvements in the early care, education, health, and well-being of Connecticut's children. OEC works collaboratively with families, early childhood providers, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to promote the well-being and development of children from birth through age eight. (See the [OEC website](#) for more information.)

OEC Mission:

To partner with families of young children to advance equitable early childhood policies, funding, and programs; support early learning and development; and strengthen the critical role of all families, providers, educators, and communities throughout a child's life. We will assertively remove barriers, and build upon the strengths of historically disenfranchised people and communities, to ensure fair access to OEC resources.



OEC Vision:

All young children in Connecticut are safe, healthy, learning, and thriving. Each child is surrounded by a strong network of nurturing adults who deeply value the importance of the first years of a child's life; and have the skills, knowledge, support, and passion to meet the unique needs of every child.



As shown in Figure 1, OEC oversees a network of programs and services that help young children and families thrive, including child care, early intervention, home visiting, licensing, and state subsidy among others.

Figure 1:

OEC Divisions and Services



Quality Improvement

Provides early childhood professionals with supports to improve child care practices through Elevate, OEC's quality improvement systems; and training and technical assistance activities to support accreditation, higher education, scholarships, and quality initiatives



Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)

Subsidizes the child care expenses for eligible low-income families while funding systems and policies to improve the overall quality of and increase the supply of child care



Family Support

Home Visiting, Help Me Grow, and Sparkler provide parenting and child development support to families of young children and pregnant women



Parent Cabinet

Advisory group that partners with OEC to elevate family voice and develop family-driven policies, programs, and practices



Early Care and Education (ECE)

Supports more than 400 ECE programs serving over 18,000 children



Birth to Three

Providers support families whose children have developmental delays and disabilities. Children and families are supported by licensed professionals in the child's home and community



Licensing

License and inspect more than 4,000 child care and youth camp programs to ensure health and safety



Background Checks

Oversee comprehensive background checks for child care providers



Agency Administrative Functions

Fiscal, Legal, Communications, Grants and Contracts, Data and Research



Government & Community Relations

Legislation and policy, outreach and engagement with key stakeholders and partners

Why Have a Parent Cabinet?

Early on in its development as an agency, OEC created an [Early Care and Education Action Plan](#) to help prioritize its work toward the goals outlined in their [2020 Strategic Plan](#). The action plan was developed through statewide input sessions in 2017–18, and identified needs around parent engagement, communication, information, and collaboration.

This resulted in the creation of the following high-level objectives:

- Build infrastructure for **direct relationships with and channels for families** to get the information they need, and provide meaningful feedback to the system.
- Create better resources to communicate with families on program availability, safety and quality, and eligibility requirements.
- Implement feedback loops with parents through better communications, family surveys, community meetings, webinars, and community liaisons, among others.

The agency did not have the infrastructure for regular two-way communication with families, and for families to be at the OEC decision-making table. With this as a strategic priority, **OEC moved forward with creating a Parent Cabinet**. The Parent Cabinet would help OEC make structural changes to increase equitable policies, programs, and laws that directly affect young children and their families. This work was both aligned with and supported by an updated OEC mission, vision, and guiding principles that also included a racial, cultural, and equity lens, and highlighted the critical role of families. The OEC leaned on the rich history CT has in family engagement and parent leadership ([as noted in the prior section](#)).

Parents and caregivers need to get a say in the laws and policies that directly affect their families. It is crucial to have any agency, system, or service work with those who are the most impacted by those systems or services to determine what's working, and develop solutions to the problems they identify.

Each person brings a lens or perspective that is built from their knowledge, background, and experiences. Parents who have experience navigating systems see things from a unique perspective that others who have not been a part of that system cannot – even those who created the system. It is key to work with those who are the most impacted by those systems or services, to share what's working and help identify or advise around solutions and improvements. This process, if done correctly, mobilizes and empowers change, and advances equity.

There is research that shows the effectiveness of parent leadership. In education, strong family-school partnerships have been shown to improve school climate, teacher morale and retention, parent-child relationships, and student achievement.^[1] Families who are involved in advocacy and leadership activities serve as important role models for their children.^[2] Another study found that parent leadership shifted the perception in the community, helped with kindergarten readiness, and “Parent Leaders came to be viewed as people who can make a difference in the community.”^[3]

[1] Mapp, K.L., Henderson, A., et al. (2022). Everyone Wins! The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships & Implications for Practice. New York: Scholastic.

[2] Cunningham, S. D., Kreider, H., & Ocón, J. (2012). Influence of a parent leadership program on participants' leadership capacity and actions. *School Community Journal*, 22(1), 111-124.

[3] Douglass, A.L., Maroney, M.R., Coonan, M. et al. “You have a status”: a case study of parent leadership in a U.S. school readiness initiative. *ICEP* 13, 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-019-0058-5>

What do states gain by partnering with people with personal expertise?

- An end product shaped by parents from various backgrounds and experiences that create an equitable foundation for the Parent Cabinet
- Building relationships and hearing from those connected with young families or navigating systems themselves as parents on the ground
- Better services and outcomes
- Making sure parents feel valued by giving them a voice and listening to them



CHENAE RUSSELL (OEC): “I think states gain authentic relationships and stronger systems that work for families, versus systems that only work for states. So, flipping that and having parents and guardians at the center, states gain a stronger connection with parents – knowing what’s really happening. You may think, ‘Okay, this system’s great, it looks perfect on paper.’ But sometimes it’s the complete opposite and doesn’t work for families. States’ systems benefit having parents at the table. They gain experts on the ground. They gain a true partnership.”

An example: The Parent Cabinet co-designed a statewide parent survey in 2022 with the OEC to better understand parent needs and wants related to child care, employment, and mental health. Their involvement with outreach led to the OEC receiving 2.5 times the number of responses compared to the last survey in 2020. The survey results helped inform and shape the initial planning for the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care Report.



JANINE MCMAHON (PARENT LEADER): “**Better programs and services.** You might be well-intentioned, but not know what families really need. You also gain **valuable input**; for example, our parent survey response rate doubled because parent voices were involved. Including people with personal experience is important, and it’s necessary to really strengthen and elevate this work. It doesn’t make sense to try to address a situation, a gap, or barrier without the people who are accessing the systems being at the forefront of it.”



MARY MCALLISTER (PARENT LEADER): “Agencies will **save money**, because if you ask people to help with the process, you’re not going to have to redo it.”



CASEY (PARENT CABINET MEMBER): “Commissioner Bye will come to us with a question. One time, she asked about child care hours and we shared. At the end, she said: ‘**I wouldn’t have expected these answers.**’ It shaped her decisions.”



**Families Should Not Only Be a Voice,
Families Need to be Part of the Action!**

Why have a Co-Creation Process and Parent Cabinet Design Team?

Given its vision to have a Parent Cabinet that would inform the work of the state agency, OEC knew that it couldn't create and launch a parent-led body without engaging parents first in figuring out how it should function, the role and expectation of the members, and the structure. There needed to be buy-in from parents and parent leaders in order for the creation and launch to be successful. To achieve this, OEC tried a new approach of bringing together parent leaders and community members to design the Parent Cabinet. This group of 10 parents, community leaders, and OEC staff, with a wide variety of experiences, became known as the **OEC Parent Cabinet Design Team**.

OEC utilized a co-creation process to form the Parent Cabinet – working with the Design Team. Defined simply, **co-creation is any act of collective creativity that is experienced jointly by two or more people or entities, with the intent of creating something that is not known in advance.**^[6] It opens the design and implementation process up to a wide range of voices that may normally never be involved as a partner from the beginning. Co-creation is predicated on the notion that traditional top-down planning or decision-making should give way to a more flexible participatory structure, where diverse constituencies are invited in to collectively solve problems. Co-creation gives parents a strong sense of agency, the people who ultimately matter. The next section describes the co-creation process.



Parent Cabinet Design Team, OEC Staff, and Parent Cabinet Members

^[6] CO-CREATION: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens by Patricia Bowie

II. Co-Creating the Parent Cabinet with the Design Team

Formation of the Design Team

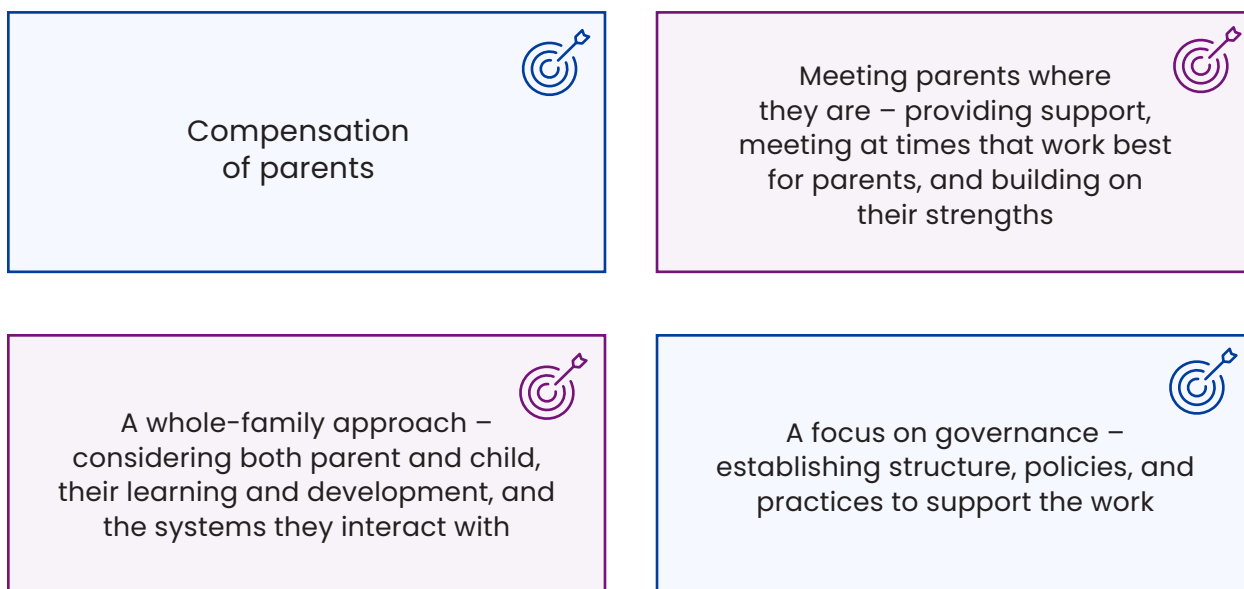


Parent Cabinet Design Team and OEC Staff

The CT Office of Early Childhood (OEC) engaged in an extensive design process to create the Parent Cabinet. In 2019, OEC recruited parent leaders to participate on the Design Team – drawing on parent leaders who participated in the [Two-Generational \(2Gen\)](#) Initiative; were in Head Start, Special Education, and/or Early Childhood fields; and graduates of parent leadership programs, such as the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). Ten (10) leaders – a majority were parents along with community early childhood leaders – worked with OEC staff to develop the structure for the Parent Cabinet, meeting bi-monthly from December 2019 through April 2021.

Selecting members of the Design Team was more of an organic process than a structured approach. The selection of the individuals was based on two main factors: trust and experience. Members brought a wide variety of experiences and perspectives to the Team, but all had a shared passion for wanting to raise parent voice. This was important to ensure that it would be equitable in the core of what the Parent Cabinet would do and how it would function.

Design Team parents drew on best practices from their participation in parent leadership bodies, including the 2Gen Advisory Board and Head Start Policy Council. These practices included:



The Design Team’s charge was as follows:

- Design and assist in establishing an OEC Parent Cabinet to inform, guide, and make recommendations about the work of the OEC as it relates to the impact on families on an ongoing basis.
- Use a co-creation approach consisting of parent leaders, OEC staff, and other partners agreed upon by the committee.
- Commit to meeting up to four more times to complete design process.

Authentic Parent Leadership

Design Team members described the process as **an authentic partnership and co-creation process**. As one member noted: “It was literally a collaborative process. A co-design process in every sense of the word. I’ve usually been invited into things where something is already constructed, established. And... they’re asking for input. And this literally was designing whatever this was going to be from the ground up in partnership with the staff.”

Team members praised OEC leadership for being intentional about engaging diverse voices (including fathers); listening to the range of parent perspectives; following through on identified tasks; providing background information needed to make informed decisions; incorporating team ideas into the Cabinet design; and allowing the time for the group to reach consensus on the design.

In a presentation at the September 2022 CT Parent Leadership Summit, Design Team members shared their experiences:

- This was an authentic partnership with parent leaders to create together all aspects of the Parent Cabinet.
- While the process took more time, the “end result was so much stronger and better.”
- The design process aligned with OEC’s mission of advancing equity “by not just creating [the Cabinet] internally, but instead with those who will be impacted and to ensure a better outcome.”
- The Design Team developed the Cabinet’s overall framework; mission statement; logo; and the application materials and process (see sidebar for mission). To ensure geographic representation, the Team utilized the 6 CT Department of Children and Families (DCF) regions with two members per region, along with 3 at-large members.



MARY MCCALLISTER: “I’ve been on other committees and collaboratives that try to be parent-centered, but are usually like, ‘We have this product, please give us your feedback on this product.’ This was not like that at all. This was literally, ‘We would like to make a product. I don’t know what it is exactly, we have some idea of what it might do, but literally build it from scratch.’ This process had an enormous amount of respect for parents’ viewpoints and real trust building.”

Steps in Planning and Co-Creating the Cabinet

STEP 1: ESTABLISH THE VISION

An organization must have foundational values and beliefs in place before co-creation can happen. Some of the values that OEC embraced before starting co-creation were:

- Be transparent with families and open to sharing information/open communication
- Form relationships – relationship-building is important with families
- Value the role of the parent as the child's first teacher
- Engagement of families leads to better outcomes for children



CHENAE RUSSELL: “Part of being humble is also to build trust. It’s really critical to build trust with parents, especially as a government agency, or any type of agency with power that may have a history of affecting families in a negative way, especially for families of color. Being aware of that and naming it and being able to say this is important to us, and we want to build that trust, and be humble and open-minded. And looking at what the true purpose of a system or services is, and if it’s truly to help families, and parents or children, they should not have barriers or limited access for those families and parents. It’s important to be able to meet parents where they are and say ‘We’re doing this together,’ not ‘We are developing this and then we’re just going to insert you.’ This is the opposite approach – those who are the most affected by the policies and programs are the experts.”

STEP 2: SET THE TABLE WITH INTENTION

Building on the foundational work in Connecticut with family engagement and parent leadership, OEC intentionally created safe spaces for hard conversations, relationship building, and ongoing support. OEC put into action the values and beliefs needed to set the table and create a welcoming seat for parents:

- OEC staff served as guides and facilitators of the meetings. To achieve group synergy, members must grow to trust and value each member.
- Intentionality to these relationships is key and relationship building exercises must be a part of each group meeting. This could include the use of ice breakers, one-on-one or small group conversations, and intentionality for members to constantly connect their “why” to the work and decisions.

- The staff set the context, laid out decisions that needed to be made, and helped reach group consensus by actively listening, restating and summarizing key points of the discussion, promoting brainstorming, and ensuring each person's voice and opinions were heard and valued.

STEP 3: ADDRESS POWER DYNAMICS

There was a focus on shifting the power/control dynamics to a shared leadership model. This was done by:

- Being a learning organization
- OEC staff having an open mind and buy-in to the importance of gaining trust and allowing others to be heard and be a part of the process
- Parents having the authority to design and make decisions with OEC with accompanying touchpoints with the Commissioner throughout the process
- Having end goals and guardrails with the rest of the process being organic and driven by what the parents' all agreed should be included



STEPHAN PALMER: "For me, the partnership was the biggest part. If you're going to bring parents to the table and say that they're partners, then they need to be treated as equal partners. And what they say needs to be taken seriously. And you need to provide training and pay."



MALISSA GRIFFITH: "It's all about relationships, trust, communication, and being true, authentic selves. You need to be transparent and make folks feel included and valued. Trust takes time to build. Leaders often think they are the experts, but they don't know everything. Be open and willing to learn. CT was blessed that OEC had the vision and ability to make this happen, and to include real-life families from across the state. And not the, 'I love your voice, but we already decided this.' Too often executive boards behind the scenes are the real decision makers. Here it was the parents. And they didn't rush the process and really listened to parents. It was a true, honest, authentic partnership."

Design Team Meetings



The Design Team and OEC staff met bi-weekly for an hour from December 2019 through April 2021 – having to pivot to all virtual meetings in March 2020 due to COVID-19. In between Design Team meetings, lead OEC staff met to plan upcoming meetings, transcribe meeting minutes, and touch base with individual team members as needed.

There were touchpoints with the OEC Commissioner throughout to ensure the planning was on track, and to seek agency decisions or guidance (when needed). The Design Team was given an end goal of creating a diverse Parent Cabinet – ensuring the Parent Cabinet represented all geographic regions, and included families with young children who utilize OEC services. But within these parameters, the rest of the process was organic, and evolved over the course of many meetings and discussions.



RENEE KLEINMAN: “[We needed to have] trust in the process. It can be frustrating without a clear ending or product, which is expected in this society. We didn’t have that here. Respect and flexibility. We didn’t have a strict deadline, which helped because this process takes time. It allows people to think and reflect. So often there are preconceived expectations and people get frustrated. You must be willing to let go of expectations. Put your egos aside and work collaboratively. It’s not that we don’t want to hear what you know, but you need to listen to us.”



OEC Design Team, OEC Inaugural Parent Cabinet, and OEC Staff

Frameworks & Models

At its initial meetings, the Design Team researched and based their work on key [models and frameworks](#), as well as reviewing parent advisory and leadership groups in other states. In addition to the models and frameworks created in Connecticut ([see Section I](#)), the Design Team also relied on the following national models:

- [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems](#) (Center for the Study of Social Policy). To help early childhood systems learn to work with parents in ways that promote equitable outcomes and maximize opportunities for all children, 40 parent leaders and agency staff from nine EC-LINC communities came together in January 2018 to create a manifesto for change. Some key areas that were reflected in the design process are the vision that:
 - **Parents are at the center**
 - **Parents are participating at all levels**
 - **Parents are valued as experts**
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC). OEC worked closely with NAEYC – a professional membership organization that promotes high-quality early learning for young children – to support program quality through the OEC’s quality improvement system, [Elevate](#). The Design Team drew on NAEYC’s accreditation standard 7, which calls for programs to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with each child’s family to foster children’s development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture. This is connected to the relationship and partnership developed with all the parent leaders where we recognize them as human and all they bring from their experience, language, culture, and more.

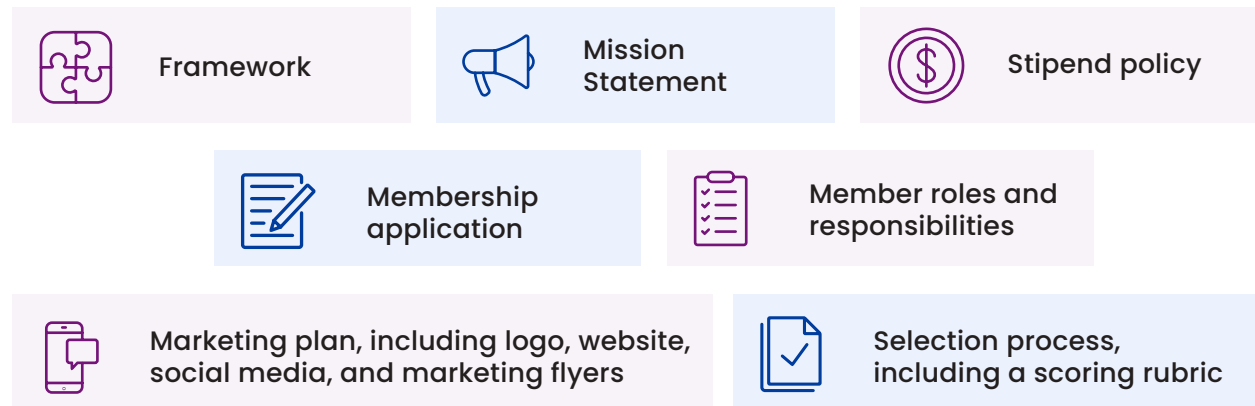
Design Team Recommendations & Deliverables

In 2020-21, the Design Team made **critical decisions** regarding how the Parent Cabinet was structured and how it functioned. Design Team guidance and recommendations included the following:

- Membership and Geographic Representation:
 - 15-member advisory Cabinet with 2 members per region based on the 6 CT Department of Children & Families regions and 3 at-large seats
 - A 60/40 split for members of the Parent Cabinet – 60% needed to be parents of current children aged birth-5 who utilize state services, and 40% “other” including parents with older children, grandparents, or community members
- Roles and Responsibilities of Parent Cabinet Members:
 - Parent Cabinet is responsible for advising on the direction of the agency, including program design and operation, and long- and short-term planning goals and objectives, taking into account strategic planning, needs assessment data, and agency self-assessment. The Parent Cabinet will serve as a vehicle to build connections among CT families, communities and the OEC, and through leadership opportunities elevate the expertise of parents with young children throughout the state system.
 - The duties of Parent Cabinet members need to be highly organized to ensure their valuable time is maximized, and their efforts are timely, efficient, and effective. Responsibilities need to be clear for Parent Cabinet members.
 - Members need to be supported throughout to do their job well. OEC must be intentional in ensuring Parent Cabinet members do not get “burnt out”.
- Application and Selection:
 - An open call for applications instead of nominations
- Training and Support:
 - Implement mentoring training and succession planning/reporting
 - Training should be ongoing for all Cabinet members and must be offered at a separate time outside of meetings
 - Training needs to be connected to duties and relevant to what the Parent Cabinet is looking to learn or do; for example, how to:
 - 1) create surveys and analyze the data, 2) utilize different platforms for virtual meetings, shared documents, etc. 3) public speaking, and 4) reach “hard to reach” families and connect with community-based organizations

- Training on how OEC wants the parents to report back to them on their time, activities, and efforts
 - Facilitation training, outreach, motivational interviewing
 - Understanding proposals/how to review proposals
- Meetings:
- The Parent Cabinet needs to meet more frequently than 4 times per year (the initial proposed meeting schedule before it became monthly) or needs subcommittees that meet monthly to address certain topics
 - Need to be when parents can attend – dates announced with plenty of notice, do Doodle polls, and allow for flexibility (both in-person and virtual)
- Duration of Term:
- The terms need to be staggered to ensure institutional memory; do not want all those with the historical knowledge leaving at the same time
 - The group came to a decision on a 2-year term to start
- Compensation:
- There were initial challenges with compensating the Design Team members. Knowing that compensating parents for their time and expertise is a best practice in family engagement work, OEC was committed to setting up a system that worked for both the agency and parents. Some of these initial difficulties included the restrictions of being able to purchase gift cards and getting the okay to pay parents using the state fiscal system. OEC decided not to make parents contractors in the state system, but instead contract with a nonprofit where there was a relationship established and funds to pay the parents. OEC found this process much more efficient, and the parents also found this process easy, as they only had to complete a W-9 and could set up direct deposit.
 - Design Team members stated that they did not want gift cards as these were limited in usage and they all preferred to receive stipends, as these could be used to pay bills, build savings, etc. However, when compensating families, the importance of flexibility is critical. Given the different financial situations of some parents, the stipends could potentially jeopardize other benefits they receive. Families might experience benefit cliffs, the sudden and often unexpected decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earnings. In those cases, gift cards may be preferred. Undocumented parents may also choose gift cards versus stipends.

The final products of the Design Team included the Parent Cabinet's:



See the Appendix for the most recent version of these documents and tools, and below for a description of the application and selection process.

After the Design Team formally completed its work in 2021, members continued to participate in the Parent Cabinet in the following ways:

- Participating on Parent Cabinet member Selection Committees
- Meet & greet facilitation for new Parent Cabinet members
- Help with onboarding new Parent Cabinet members
- Participating in professional development opportunities
- Co-presenting with Parent Cabinet members nationally and locally
- Helping to connect to the CT 2Gen family workgroup work



Parent Cabinet Design Team, Parent Cabinet Members, and OEC Staff



LISA GRIFFEN: “[You need] a well-established, ‘what is your why’. Every community might answer that question a little bit differently. So, if you can firmly establish your why, then you can build from that. And everybody’s community needs are going to be a little bit different. And what their early childhood landscape looks like is going to be a little bit different. So, I think really establishing why we are doing this work is important and would help give you a good place to launch.”



DEPUTY COMMISSIONER ELENA TRUEWORTHY (OEC): “I think the people who are vested in this, especially the leaders, need to see parents as experts, not only in their child’s learning and development and health and growth, which is a much more common kind of saying out there. Parents are the child’s first teacher, that’s commonplace. It’s not commonplace to hear parents and families are experts in early childhood systems. So that must be there, that foundational respect and value of what parents bring to the table. You must have an open-minded ability to be able to listen and reflect and to learn. And so, I think that’s key. I think being vulnerable and being humble is very needed because if you think you know it all, you can’t do this work. Say to yourself, I don’t know it all, so others need to inform me, and need to inform the system, and the best people to inform the system are those who are using it.”



CAMERON WEST: “Let’s approach families from a strength-based perspective and still work on things with them, but let them sort of be in partnership with us, and be the drivers of the changes that they want to see in their lives. So, that was a philosophical shift for some people who were only looking at the deficits of people and thinking they were going to fix or save them.”



CAROLINE AUSTIN: “This was ours from thought to inception, parents were included in every single part of the process. The people undergirding the work (OEC) really care and were committed to include parents as decision makers, not just to inform them. This was a true partnership. Do not use a top-down approach. Those in executive leadership need to let go of what they think they know and listen to understand, not listen to respond. They need to be able to look beyond themselves and listen to what people say they need, not what you think they need. That is true leadership. Race and equity are foundational. Also listening to parents and the community on what’s working and what’s not. Recognize the strengths of parents, cultivating others not in positions of perceived power – become messengers to the community – each one teaches one. Also, parents need compensation, this is work. They also need advancement opportunities. Funding is important – this work takes money. Parents need to be able to change laws, policies, and procedures to best suit families (e.g., child care hours, where facilities are located, etc.).”



Parent Cabinet Design Team and OEC Staff Member

Development of the Parent Cabinet Application, Scoring, & Selection Process

Application & Scoring Rubric

In developing the Parent Cabinet member application and the rubric for scoring applications, Design Team members highlighted the importance of creating a diverse Cabinet and, as such, created the marketing materials, application, and scoring rubric to support that goal. The application was designed with equity in mind and ensured that the language used was accessible. The application asked for demographic information, the applicant's contact information, and how they heard about the Parent Cabinet. However, none of this contextual information was scored; only the responses to the four prompts were scored (see sidebar).

Application Prompts

1. Experience advocating for yourself or your child

2. School, community, parent groups, or other volunteer experiences

3. Leadership roles, including challenges and responses

4. Why you want to serve on the Cabinet and what you would contribute

For the scoring rubric, the Design Team decided what should be evaluated and how to weigh the scored prompts. For example, availability was weighted at 20% of the overall score compared to other prompts that were weighted at 10%. Applicants could also only score a 1 or 5 on the availability category, while other prompts allowed for a score between 1 and 5. Experience was weighted higher than education. The rubric and application went through several iterations and tests for validity (see the Appendix for final versions).

Design Team members and OEC wanted to ensure the Cabinet was regionally balanced and diverse. One of the main goals and area of consensus was for the Cabinet to have a mix of members who:

- Represent different demographics and cultures
- Are parents of children age birth to 5 who use OEC programs and supports (such as Care 4 Kids, Home Visiting, and Birth to Three)
- Do not have children who use OEC services — such as parents with older children or people who represent other areas of community
- Represent every region of the state (according to the [Department of Children and Families](#) (DCF) map)
- Co-presenting with Parent Cabinet members nationally and locally
- Total # of members: 15 members total (each with one identified from each region plus 3 open seats)
 - 60% are parents or guardians of current children ages prenatal to age 5 who utilize OEC state-funded services for their children (child care, Care 4 Kids, Home Visiting, Birth to Three, etc.)
 - 40% are “other” members, such as parents with older children, parents of young children not utilizing OEC-funded services, community members, etc.



Parent Cabinet Members

Scoring & Selection Process

The Design Team and OEC created the selection process – which consisted of having **6 Selection Committees** each composed of an OEC staff member, a Design Team parent leader, and a community leader for each of the six regions. It was important to have Design Team members on the Selection Committees to ensure that their vision for the Cabinet was fulfilled.

The OEC aligned the selection process with the agency's Home Visiting Request for Proposals process, with support from the Harvard Government Performance Lab:

1.



The Selection Committee read applications and scored them based on the key elements in the scoring rubric.

2.



The committees then conducted interviews with the top 5 candidates from each region.

3.



The final members were recommended by each Selection Committee for their region with final approval by the OEC Commissioner and staff supporting the Parent Cabinet.



MALISSA GRIFFITH: “We broke up our Selection Committees so that we were in regions we weren’t familiar with to ensure we were being fair and equitable across the board. Or, if I was in a region where people were applying that I knew, I made sure to abstain or make sure to be in a different region.”

Critical Aspects of the Design Process

The backbone support provided by OEC staff was absolutely vital to the success of the project. It took a lot of time and energy to coordinate. Their dedication and commitment to elevating parent voices was clear to all. They were instrumental in creating a safe, inclusive environment to allow the process to unfold, which was vital. Critical aspects of the planning process included constant communication and feedback loops, diversity of perspectives, regularly scheduled and consistent meetings, and transparency by all.

OEC also **intentionally created safe spaces for authentic conversations, relationship building, and ongoing support.** This was done by:

- Relationship building activities in-person
- OEC staff not coming with their titles and the attitude that they are better than others or know more
- OEC staff recognizing that not all parents have trust or good experiences with state agencies and that trust needs to be built
- Compensating parents as the professionals and experts that they are
- Meeting parents where they are (meeting in the evening times, hybrid meetings, losing acronyms, and explaining the process)
- Learning the Design Team members' "why" to understand their self-interest and motivation
- Being available for any needs or questions

Design Team members and OEC staff offered additional tips for success:

- Be clear on the role of the Design Team members and the purpose of the group after the co-creation process is complete. Make sure to keep very detailed records of all the work done with the parents, how decisions were made, and the end results.
- Learn the best way to compensate team members and set up the payment process ahead of time to avoid any delays in payments. Also, leave a buffer to compensate for more time as the process might take longer than expected.
- Be realistic in the amount of staff time and backbone support the agency needs to provide in the co-creation and implementation of the parent advisory body.
- Understand that this work may be frustrating at times as state agencies include structures and processes that were not created to share power and welcome parents as equal partners.



ELENA TRUEWORTHY: “There needs to be a key **point person** who is readily available and has the skillset to work with families and can communicate effectively in a variety of ways. They need to focus on relationship building and have the flexibility to meet when parents are able, which means evenings and weekends. You also need to be able to translate parent feedback into the bureaucratic language required by state agencies.”



CAMERON WEST: “I really think the **Design Team’s diversity** was critical. We had people coming from different backgrounds, with different education, women, men, different ethnic backgrounds. We had parents with children with special needs, parents with young children, so you get a different level of experience across the board, you hear from different perspectives.”



JOYCE BOSCO: “What were the critical aspects of the planning process that supported the success of the projects? **Feedback loops were critical.** When ideas were discussed, there was follow-up at the next scheduled meetings to discuss plans for implementation or reasons why the ideas may not work, always done in a completely respectful manner.”



LISA GRIFFEN: “I believe the **bi-weekly meetings** were very helpful. I think it was critical that everybody had a voice. But for me I think the most important thing was that you were able to disagree in a very safe space. It was never confrontational. Elena made it a place where people felt safe to voice their opinions and their ideas, and because of that, people were able to share past experiences that might have been unsuccessful or painful, share things that were successful, throw out ideas that may have seemed outrageous, but might just work. And because it felt so safe, and because we were able to disagree and come to a consensus, or agree to disagree, I think it made for a really rich discussion. There were so many acronyms thrown around that I would try to take notes and just when I thought I got a handle on them, there’d be another acronym coming down the pike. So that’s important to think about in parent engagement. Don’t do alphabet soup when you’re engaging with parents.”



MARY MCALLISTER: “Really offering education to parents, **building trust by having consistent follow up, consistent communication, following through**, doing what you say you’re going to do.”



JANINE MCMAHON: “Good **communication** on behalf of the OEC. Their support with scheduling, creating clear agendas, and using the world café model, bringing in different components. Having parent voices at the table is critical. Here we were heard and valued.”



Parent Cabinet Design Team, OEC Staff, and Elaine Zimmerman, former ACF Region 1 Administrator

The following table summarizes the challenges and benefits of the co-creation process:

CHALLENGES

- Acronyms/jargon
- Time constraints
- Agency capacity/skills
- Power dynamics
- Non-negotiables
- Bureaucracy



BENEFITS

- End-product significantly better
- Buy-in increase
- Deeper understanding
- Retention of product and people
- “Builds the bench”
- Saves time in the long run



CO-CREATION ACTION STEPS:

Stage 1: Vision and Planning

INTERNAL

- ☐ Assess your understanding of best practices of shared leadership, active listening, and co-designing processes.
- ☐ Understand your vision and gather foundational thinking and/or documents that already exist that define the work. Share these with others who you may want to engage to create buy-in and excitement for the project.
- ☐ Assess the infrastructure for supporting parent-led initiatives. Understand your own ability to support the work. Ensure resources and funding, staff capacity, and schedule flexibility are available.
- ☐ Assess agency staff: confirm they have the time (and can meet evenings) and the skills to support the parents, and keep navigating inclusion into structures that do not normally welcome parents.

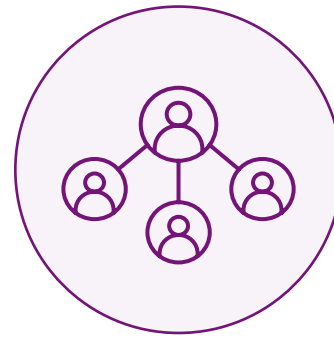
ORGANIZATIONAL

- ☐ Do an internal and external audit of resources that can be designated to support the development of the Parent Cabinet.
- ☐ Identify key partners and allies in this space to collaborate with.
- ☐ Identify consistent key staff that have the time and the expertise to partner with parent groups effectively.
- ☐ Define the goals of the project to be shared with the parent Design Team and other key stakeholders.
- ☐ Establish a parent Design Team that reflects what is needed on the ideal Parent Cabinet and to represent parents across the state.

OPERATIONAL

- ☐ Meet parents where they are, change agency approach to a family perspective, and explain agency perspective when needed.
- ☐ Define the role of the Parent Cabinet members, including the commitment of time, compensation, and expected job duties. This serves as a baseline for their role with the expectation that this may change as the project evolves.
- ☐ Work with the Design Team as partners and advisors, and involve them in all decision making every step of the way.
 - Be transparent and establish trust
 - Ensure agendas, tools, products are developed with parent perspectives
 - Encourage parents to take the lead
 - Equalize the voices and power dynamics of staff and parents
 - Thoughts and decisions should be documented and changes noted so that members see specifically how their input was used

III. Recruitment & Selection of Inaugural Parent Cabinet



Recruitment Process

The OEC and Design Team disseminated the Parent Cabinet application via multiple outlets – including the OEC website; emails across OEC distribution lists; posting to listservs and social media; sharing flyers about early childhood education (ECE), early intervention, child care subsidies, Home Visiting, and other OEC-funded programs to post; and sharing with local early childhood collaboratives and parent groups, among others. Design Team members also took an active role in sharing via their networks, holding information sessions with OEC, and presenting at meetings with parent leadership groups.

The application for the Parent Cabinet was launched in English and Spanish May 2021 and closed June 2021. A total of 68 parents completed applications. The 68 Parent Cabinet applicants reported hearing about the opportunity from a range of sources:

- From local agencies, including schools, ECE programs, EC councils, or providers/therapists (25%).
- From parent leadership and/or advocacy groups, including [PLTI](#) (Parent Leadership Training Institute) and [CPAC](#) (CT Parent Advocacy Center), among others (21%).
- Via general word of mouth – including from a friend, colleague, teacher, or named person (18%).
- From other sources, including the OEC website, Facebook/social media posts, and emails/listserv posts (approximately 10% each).

Lessons Learned on Recruitment

- Expand successful strategies including: (1) non-traditional targeted outreach, such as the playground or Family Resource centers, for example. (2) Offering to meet with prospective members to help complete the application. And (3) using different outreach methods to reach fathers (e.g., barber shops, sports programs).
- Translate all materials into multiple languages besides Spanish, as some parents are stronger in their native language even if bilingual with English.
- Have a clear and resourced outreach plan that reaches all areas of the state, especially traditionally underserved communities, and communities with diverse perspectives and backgrounds.
- Clarify on application about who can or cannot apply.
- Be flexible and nimble in the design, application, and selection process.

2024 Recruitment Improvements

In 2024, the second cohort of Parent Cabinet members was recruited. The process was revised as follows:

- Parent Cabinet members provided feedback on the application where some questions were reworded or taken off based on feedback from the Parent Cabinet (see the Appendix for the latest version of the application).
- The scoring rubric was updated to ensure that the final Cabinet was composed of 60% of families that engage with OEC services, and are diverse with personal experiences and backgrounds.
- Application and materials were translated into 3 more languages besides Spanish to Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Hindi.
- The application was hosted on the OEC website.
- There was an option for the essay questions to be submitted by voice recording, as well as written, to help with equity for those who aren't the strongest writers, but still have the experience needed.
- On the website, OEC specified those not allowed to apply (e.g., employed by or receiving funds from OEC).
- The website encouraged bilingual parents to apply.
- The application was open for 8 weeks total. This is longer than the last time, and resulted in 148 applications.

Selection Process

The selection process included the following steps:

1.



The 6 Selection Committees — composed of an OEC staff member, parent leader, and community leader — are formed to review applications from each region.

2.



All members receive training to get them ready for the selection process.

3.



Applicants are evaluated on experience with OEC services and state services, parent leadership, and experience in community work.

4.



After scoring, there is a debrief to discuss then move forward with the top 5 applicants for interviews. These debriefs are led by a non-scoring facilitator to ensure that evaluators adhere to committee norms and protocols, detecting and guarding against bias, and creating the space for each committee member to participate equally.

5.



The final 5 applicants are interviewed. All committee members, including the non-scoring facilitator, conduct a conversational-style interview to get to know applicants more, and decide on the top 2 and potential at-large seat selections.

Selecting and Training Evaluators & Facilitators

OEC staff reached out to people in the community, local early childhood collaboratives, and parent leaders, among others, to recruit people to review, score, and evaluate the applications. OEC shared a high-level overview of the Parent Cabinet formation process to orient volunteers to the process. As with all other aspects of the work, the team worked to ensure diversity and regional representation. There were Design Team parents initially on these until we had Parent Cabinet members who could serve this role for future cohorts. The parents were compensated, while staff and community members volunteered.

The team identified four primary roles for the process: (1) committee chairs; (2) official evaluators; (3) alternate evaluators; and (4) facilitators. The roles and responsibilities of each are described in the graphic.

Roles and Responsibilities

 COMMITTEE CHAIRS	 OFFICIAL EVALUATORS	 ALTERNATES	 FACILITATORS
✓ Signs and returns Ethics and Confidentiality Agreement • Presides over the entire Committee • Acts as Evaluation Committee's Official Representative • Communicates with Commissioner • Makes final judgement on any ambiguity arising from applications or process • Resolves disputes if they cannot be resolved at the subcommittee level • Calculates scores	• Signs and returns Ethics and Confidentiality Agreement ✓ Participates in a kick-off orientation (1.5–2 hours) • Reads, reviews, and independently scores applications prior to scoring discussions • Submits scores for written application in a timely manner • Engages thoughtfully in scoring discussions with other colleagues • Interviews 2nd round candidates • Makes final Cabinet membership recommendations	✓ Signs and returns Ethics and Confidentiality Agreement ✓ Participates in a kick-off orientation (1.5–2 hours) • Reads, reviews, and independently scores applications prior to scoring discussions • Replaces official scorer designee in case of emergency or other circumstances* <i>*Alternates will be notified if they become Official Evaluators prior to the commencement of scoring discussions. If Alternates are not notified, they may choose to audit the scoring discussions.</i>	✓ Signs and returns Ethics and Confidentiality Agreement • Reviews applications prior to scoring discussion • During scoring discussions, sets a collaborative tone, enforces agreed-upon norms, facilitates productive conversations between diverse perspectives, and addresses any biases that surface explicitly and implicitly • Takes official notes • Reports sub-committee scoring decisions to Committee Chairperson

It's important to note the role of the facilitator, which is not typically used in candidate selection processes. The facilitator role was intentionally created for the following reasons:

1. There were many people involved and multiple components of the review process – reading applications, scoring applications, tabulating the scores, and making recommendations – so having individuals whose role was explicitly around facilitating the process was helpful in making sure that things were moving along.
2. Reading and scoring applications can consume a lot of cognitive and emotional energy, so the team wanted to reduce the administrative burden on reviewers to the extent possible.
3. A facilitator can mitigate any potential biases that might surface in scoring discussions.

The facilitator role requires individuals who are empathetic, comfortable with multitasking, and willing to intervene when necessary. In addition to moving the process along, the facilitators were responsible for setting a warm and inclusive tone; listening for biases; and guiding the group back to core values if biases or tangents were distracting from the overall goal of establishing a representative Cabinet. Given these needs, the team specifically reached out to volunteers among OEC staff and partners who had demonstrated these qualities from prior experience.

To ensure that everyone was prepared to fulfill their responsibilities, OEC delivered the following 90-minute training sessions:

- For evaluators, one training session on reading and scoring applications was held, and then a second training session later in the process for conducting interviews with finalists. Since there were numerous scorers, each of the training courses were offered twice to accommodate different schedules.
- For the facilitators, one orientation training was held at the beginning of the process.

These trainings and other tools/resources can be found in the Appendix.

Lessons Learned for Selection Committees

Managing the Process

The number of people involved was an anticipated challenge, but still difficult to manage. In total, there were over 20 people involved in this process. Some participants could work autonomously and diligently meet deadlines; other participants needed more support, reminders, and individualized attention. This could pose a challenge for the process overall because scores were aggregated and averaged, and one person not completing their part could slow down the process for a larger group.

Participants also suggested having more time for scoring and reviewing applications, and receiving clearer guidance on deadlines.

- Due to the short amount of time and time of year in the summer it was hard recruiting those to be on selection committees. We had at least 3 but was a mix of multiple staff or design members etc.
- Many shared not realizing how much time the process would really take.

2024 Update and Lessons Learned

- Number of evaluators varies based on the number of applications received per region, with a minimum of 3 evaluators in each committee. The total number of people on the committees was 28. This again made it challenging to manage many people for the entire process. Possibly looking at reducing how many we have for committees or for interviews.
- Even though evaluators had a longer time for scoring and reviewing there was feedback to have more time allowed for each step to avoid rushing to get in.
- Being more clear on deadlines with enough time in advance consistently throughout.

Application Evaluation & Scoring



Based on Design Team recommendations, OEC used the following process to prepare Parent Cabinet applications for review and scoring:

1. Extracted all applications from a Microsoft form, which downloads as an Excel file.
2. Created an individual Word document for each application. This was a labor-intensive process, but OEC didn't want to burden scorers with a difficult-to-navigate Excel file.
3. Removed the name of applicants and information about referral sources to maintain anonymity and reduce the likelihood that biases would affect scoring.
4. Added a Microsoft-generated ID for each applicant.
5. Sorted the applications by region and shared in a Google Drive folder. Evaluators only had access to those applications in the region they were responsible for scoring.

There were three evaluators per applicant. Each evaluator rated the applications for their region using the scoring rubric. To simplify the scoring process and minimize potential mathematical errors, evaluators submitted their scores by area into an online Qualtrics form. The form included space for evaluators to record any comments they thought would be helpful for final decision making. The raw scores were pulled into Excel, where they were weighted and summed. The preliminary score was the average score across the three evaluators.

After scoring each application individually, the 3 team evaluators met to discuss their scores, assess whether they had misunderstood or misrepresented anything, and potentially revise their scores if appropriate. After all preliminary scores were tabulated, the scoring sub-teams met, and the facilitator led each scoring team in a discussion. The facilitator would start by showing all the preliminary scores and indicate any major discrepancies between evaluators (e.g., if one reviewer scored an applicant as a 5, while another reviewer scored the applicant as a 2). For applicants with major discrepancies between scorers, the facilitator would give evaluators a chance to share their rationale for assigning a

certain score. The point of this was not to convince them to change their scores to be more aligned with others, but to ensure that all dimensions of an application had been properly considered in scores. Evaluators could revise their scores after the discussion.

After major discrepancies had been discussed, the facilitator then asked the evaluators to talk through the top five applicants in a region prior to revising average scores. The discussions focused on the questions:

- What stood out to you about the top five applicants?
- Do you feel like the right five were selected to move forward in the process?
- Is there anything about the remaining applicants that stood out to you?

If all evaluators consented, the revised average scores were calculated and the top five were then forwarded to move along to the next step in the process.

Lessons Learned for Evaluation & Scoring

Managing the Process

The number of people involved was an anticipated challenge, but still difficult to manage. In total, there were over 20 people involved in this process. Some participants could work autonomously and diligently meet deadlines; other participants needed more support, reminders, and individualized attention. This could pose a challenge for the process overall because scores were aggregated and averaged, and one person not completing their part could slow down the process for a larger group.

Participants also suggested having more time for scoring and reviewing applications, and receiving clearer guidance on deadlines.

Demographic Scoring Challenges

After the application review began, evaluators reported they struggled with **how to incorporate demographic and other relevant details** from the applications into their scoring. While there were no points directly associated with these items, we had advised evaluators that they could factor demographic or relevant information into determining scores holistically. For example, if all other credentials or experiences were comparable, an evaluator could use their discretion to score a bilingual candidate higher in their responses than a monolingual candidate. However, this led to scenarios where evaluators pondered such things as: does this automatically mean that a male applicant starts at a higher baseline because there tends to be fewer male applicants? While evaluators appreciated the discretion and flexibility, they wanted more guidance.



MARY MCALLISTER: “We found that many people who were applying didn’t have the vocabulary to necessarily know they had a skill. But when you talk to them about it, they do have that skill, they just didn’t realize it, or that it’s something that they should mention at all and they might not even add value to it. They’re like, ‘Oh, I went, and I talked to my friend, and they were upset so I went, and I talked to 20, 50, 100 people.’ I’m like, wow, you are actually creating a coalition of people, but you don’t know that it’s coalition building that you did. So, once we did that and expanded to the lower scores and in the interviews, it was a huge difference. And we gave people who undervalued themselves and did not know their skills a chance to use those and get that vocabulary.”



LISA GRIFFEN: “This was another time where there was a lot of disagreement, which was great. And that helped create more diversity in the Cabinet, because we are fighting over people, like I wanted so and so because they had this in their background, and somebody else wanted somebody else because they had something else in their background or personal experience. We had the rubric. We had the application. Then we had the interview, where sometimes somebody will look a certain way on paper, but then, when you meet them there’s a disconnect, or you feel like, wow, this person on paper didn’t look all that fantastic. In person they’re amazing and they’re just what we need for this. So, I think, adding all those elements was important. There was value in the rubric, there was value in the application, and there was value in the interview.”

Complexity of Scoring Metrics

Different prompts had different weights, but all were scored on the same 1 to 5 scale. This created complexity in two ways: first, it meant that scores could not be calculated through pure addition. Weights had to be included before a score could be calculated. Second, because of the relatively small scale, the differences in points between candidates were also small. For example, the top candidate in a region might score a 4.25 and the smallest score in that region might be a 4.10. This small numerical difference made it more difficult to make the case for qualitative differences. In retrospect, the scale of the scores needed to be greater to discern differences more easily between candidates, or the weighting and points possible could have been more aligned. For example, a prompt comprising 10% of the total score will be worth 10 points, while a prompt worth 20% of the total score will be worth 20 points.

Diversity & Equity Challenges

One of the major challenges encountered was that after the top 5 scoring applicants from each region were aggregated, they tended to be similar and not reflective of the broader community. The top five applicants in each region were automatically eligible to be interviewed. However, if the team moved forward with the top five applicants from each region to an interview round, it would not be reflective of the broader community in different areas (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, languages spoken) or in experiences with early childhood programs, which the team believed would be critical to ensure building an accessible system for all families. This was a difficult reality to confront, given the efforts to mitigate bias and design a fair process.

After analyzing the data further, the group realized it could extend the number of interviews to the top eight candidates within a region, which would result in a more representative pool of interviewees. However, this would require an even greater time commitment from the community members, and staff evaluators and facilitators, who were volunteering their time. Fortunately, when the team presented this option and rationale to those involved in the selection process, everyone readily agreed to commit more time to the process. So interviews were expanded to the top eight applicants from each region. There was a balance between preserving the well-intended parts of our original process, adjusting the parts of our process that weren't working well, and making sure different voices were heard and respected.

In retrospect, the team realized that written applications favor candidates who have more experience with text-based forms. For example, some candidates wrote multiple paragraphs per prompt, sharing their personal reflections. While writing is certainly an important communication skill, the Design Team's first priority was to elevate those with experiences using services in reality, no matter if they could capture that in writing. In the future, to help level the playing field further, for example, we might consider placing parameters on the number of characters or asking for specific examples.

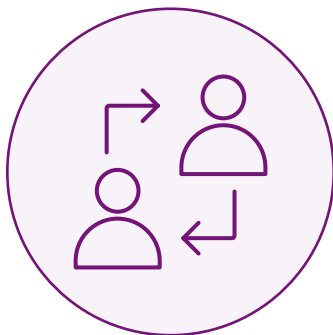
The three at-large seats at the time also provided flexibility to close gaps on the Cabinet. The team looked at the data on gender, race, use of services, languages spoken, age of children, and geographic region to determine gaps in representation.



Lessons Learned Evaluation and Scoring 2024 Updates

- There is still improvement needed with the scoring rubric as this process evolves with feedback. Some changes made have been:
 - Scoring rubric instead of in Qualtrics form was put into an Excel sheet along with the applications so all could access everything in one place.
 - Scoring those with OEC services in the present or past.
 - Scoring points to those who were a Parent Ambassador on the local level.
- Some feedback received on the rubric is:
 - Needs to capture more about those parent leaders that represent the broader community with different experiences.
 - Some candidates were eliminated even though they showed leadership but did not have the experience with OEC services, or had barriers to access those services. Consider having a larger scale and maybe not having that scored so high.
 - Being more specific about leadership experiences and capabilities.
 - Check boxes for men/grandparents, point system difference.
 - Overall having the rubric be more specific.
 - The range should be consistent and more specific. This would help eliminate it falling on an individual's perception. Having the whole rubric be a score of 1-10 or 1-5 so it does not lead to a point spread across individuals' scoring and lead to different interpretation.
- Feedback on accessing applications in an Excel sheet to score:
 - Most found it easy to navigate however some had a harder time viewing everything in one tab, and some are not as tech-savvy.
 - Suggestions were to have the applications put into a PDF to be viewed and then have a separate scoring rubric.
- Equity and Diversity continues to be an area of improvement that we're looking to strengthen. Some of the changes have been:
 - The application was hosted in Jotforms on the OEC website instead and had an option for voice recording for the essay questions to help those who are not the strongest writer but still have the experience needed.
 - There was also a cap on the number of words for the essay questions for those who did submit them in written form to help with equity.

Interviews



Each Selection Committee acted as the Interview Panel Team. For the interview round, the Team decided to reset the scores – the scores from the written application were not added to interview scores. Once an applicant made it through a round of the selection process, they had an equal chance of being selected into the Parent Cabinet.

Interview Questions & Training

Because the interviews were only scheduled for 30 minutes, evaluators had to be very intentional about the questions asked. The team started drafting questions by asking, “What things do we want to know about the applicant that didn’t come through the written application, or what would be helpful to know in making a final decision?” Once a draft was created, it was shared with others, including OEC’s Human Resources representative. From there the team continued to revise questions based on feedback and finally landed on these four prompts:

1. First, we just want to learn more about you and your personal story. Tell us a time when you accomplished something you were proud of. What strengths and skills did you draw on, and what strengths or skills would you like to continue to work on?

2. We know that being an involved community member can mean you’re juggling between different responsibilities, and we totally understand that. So, we’re curious: How do you see yourself balancing the Parent Cabinet responsibilities with the many things you’re already doing?

3. Pretend you are a member of the Parent Cabinet. You are asked to help lead a community session to gather feedback on the needs and wants of families in your region. How would you approach this responsibility? There is no right or wrong answer to this question, and even if you've never done something like this before, we just want to know who you would start talking to and what steps you'd take to begin.

4. Working with people from different backgrounds or cultures can present unique opportunities for collaboration and creativity. Can you tell us about a time when you worked on something where there were diverse perspectives? What did you learn from that experience?

The team was very mindful that interviews can make people nervous and the government hiring processes in particular can feel very rigid and make it difficult to present one's best self. But since this was not a traditional hiring process, the goal was to set applicants up for success. The team developed training with tips and tricks for creating a welcoming tone, including doing a quick ice breaker at the beginning of the interview. (See the Appendix for the training and related tools.)

When scheduling interviews, OEC confirmed if candidates needed interpretation. Those having interpretation services were given extra time to complete the interview.

Debriefing the Interviews & Final Selections

To the extent possible, debriefing sessions were scheduled immediately after the interviews, while fresh in everyone's minds. Each interviewer shared their top two applicants and the third for the at-large consideration, talked through any differences and considerations, and came to a consensus on who to recommend to the OEC Commissioner. Once approved by the Commissioner, "congratulations" letters were emailed out to those selected for acceptance.

For those not selected, an email was sent that included other opportunities for parent leadership (e.g., as a parent representative on a local early care and education body). As one parent leader noted, "We should be creating opportunities for the folks that aren't selected, creating leadership pathways. So, when you have these people who are interested in doing more, we want to provide other options for being involved." In 2024, OEC staff followed up by phone and email with candidates who were not selected to share other leadership opportunities. Ideally, staff can help make "warm connections" to these opportunities for those who made it to interviews but were not selected.

Lessons Learned on Interviewing

- Coordinating 6 selection committees with over 20 people was challenging to schedule interview times that worked for all
- There were challenges to retrieve notes from all on the committees for each candidate especially if written.

2024 Update and Lessons Learned

- Continued to struggle with the large selection committees and some not being able to make some interviews. As a result, this impacted interview panels for final selections.
- Focusing on the other leadership opportunities shared with the applicants who did not make it onto the Parent Cabinet – get input more in advance about other opportunities and house these opportunities on website.

2024 Updated Feedback

Interviewers shared the following feedback and suggestions:

- Consider having a smaller interview panel to conduct interviews for more than one region.
- Having a greater range for scoring like 1-100 or being clear that half points can be given (e.g., 4.5).
- Increasing the interview time to more than 30 minutes.
- Providing more guidance for the interview process and designating a clear leader, like the facilitators for each team, who could help with streamlining communication, scheduling, etc.
- Emphasize the importance of utilizing the scoring sheet while in the interview. Encourage all to take notes online and enter directly into sheets and not on paper.
- Using scheduling tools like Calendly. For example, the facilitators could gather all the times that the committee is available for interviews, put it into the Calendly system, and then send a link to the interviewees. The interviewee then goes in and signs up for the time that works for them. They get a notification and put in their contact information. If they have to reschedule, it can all be done within the system.

Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members Selected

OEC received 68 applications, conducted 43 interviews, and **selected 15 members**. The inaugural cohort of 15 Parent Cabinet members reflected goals for assembling a diverse Cabinet with experience with OEC and state services. At entry, members had the following characteristics:



Geography

2 members from each of the 6 regions, and **3** at-large members.



Young children

11 members had a child (or children) ages birth to 5 years old.



Experience with OEC services

4 members with Birth to Three (B23), **8** with child care, and **2** with Home Visiting.



Experience with state services/public benefits

4 members with WIC, **4** with SNAP, and **4** with Care 4 Kids (child care subsidy).



Racial/ethnic identity

8 members are Black/African American, **5** are White, and **2** are Hispanic.



Languages spoken

15 English speakers, with bilingual members also speaking Spanish (**2**), Arabic and Greek (**1**), and Haitian Creole (**1**).



Gender identity

13 female and **2** male members.

CO-CREATION ACTION STEPS:

Stage 2: Building the Cabinet

GROUNDWORK

- ☐ Establish sub-committees to tackle key aspects of the work on a timely basis that are shared with the full Design Team to vet work.
- ☐ Develop outreach strategies that help you reach key demographics you want to be reflected in the Cabinet (i.e., fathers and English-language learners).

APPLICATION AND RUBRIC

- ☐ Develop an application and rubric (scale rubric appropriately) that supports equity, inclusion, and diversity.
- ☐ Reassess application, rubric, and outreach strategies to ensure that you are connecting with key demographics. Identify consistent key staff that have the time and the expertise to partner with parent groups effectively.

INTERVIEWS

- ☐ Create an interviewing process that has fidelity built into it.

PROCESS

- ☐ Create and maintain timelines to sustain progress in challenging times, and adjust and make changes as needed together.
 - ☐ Meetings should be interactive and balanced with all voices.
- ☐ Celebrate accomplishments and victories along the way.
 - Be transparent and establish trust
 - Ensure agendas, tools, products are developed with parent perspectives
 - Encourage parents to take the lead
 - Equalize the voices and power dynamics of staff and parents
 - Thoughts and decisions should be documented and changes noted so that members see specifically how their input was used

CORE COMPONENTS

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| → Trust and respect | → Be open/vulnerable |
| → Check bias and judgments | → Self-control |
| → Actively listen | → Let others lead |
| → Receive feedback | → Collaborate |

IV. Onboarding & Launch of the Inaugural Parent Cabinet



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members

Onboarding the Parent Cabinet

The Parent Cabinet was formed in the fall of 2021. To get started, Parent Cabinet members first signed the following forms:

- An Ethics and Confidentiality form.
- A W-9 form. As noted in Section II, members are paid stipends for their participation in the Cabinet.
- A Device Agreement form for an OEC-provided Chromebook to access their state email and Microsoft Teams software. All Parent Cabinet members had official OEC emails (i.e., name@ct.gov) and access to Parent Cabinet resources via the Microsoft Teams platform.

The onboarding process was designed to make sure parents built relationships with OEC and with each other. Onboarding included:

1. In October 2021, an informal **meet and greet** was held virtually for members to start to get to know each other, and start relationship building, led by Design Team members.
2. In November 2021, a formal, full-day, online **retreat** was held to set the foundation for the work. Key aspects of the retreat included:
 - a. Learning about the OEC, state government, the process of making change, and roles.

- b. Members developing an elevator pitch, group norms, and identifying initial steps in reaching out to their communities.
- c. Providing instructions for how to access their Chromebooks, hotspots, state email addresses, and tutorials on Microsoft Outlook and Teams.
- d. Clarity on their specific responsibilities – including how many hours per month, types of approved activities, forms to be completed, and related topics.

Parent Cabinet Member Roles & Responsibilities

The Design Team created an initial framework for the Parent Cabinet – including member roles and responsibilities. However, the Team intentionally left space for the first cohort of Parent Cabinet members to refine the roles and responsibilities over the course of their terms. The roles and responsibilities described below were the result of these combined efforts.

The Parent Cabinet is a diverse, parent-led, 15-member statutory statewide advisory committee to OEC.^[7] It meets regularly to help advise the agency on how to make improvements to its programs, policies, and services that affect young children and families across the state. There are 2-3 members representing six regions of the state based on the CT Department of Children and Families. Please note that when we use the term “parent” we mean all who care and raise children in a parenting role (see Appendix A for definitions).

The mission of the Parent Cabinet is to build strong connections, listen intentionally, and partner with Connecticut families of young children, communities, and OEC to incorporate the expertise of all parents throughout the early childhood system to ensure family-driven equitable policies and programs.

Parent Cabinet members:

- Serve a 2-year term. (This was later changed to 2.5 years, with future Parent Cabinet members being selected in two cohorts to ensure staggered terms.)
- Are compensated \$25 an hour for their time and expertise. They have 6-8 hours monthly for an average of 68 hours a year.

Parent Cabinet members:

- Offer guidance to OEC on how to improve and implement programs, legislation, policies, and services related to young children and their families.
- Connect to local Parent Ambassadors to strengthen the feedback loop from local to state level.
- Elevate the needs of families from different backgrounds from across the state so their needs are heard at the state government level.

^[7] See P.A. 23-160, Sec. 40 for legislation.

- Help OEC to form lasting and effective partnerships with parents.
- Increase awareness around OEC services and supports.
- Increase their own knowledge of early childhood supports and further develop their leadership skills.

Specific member responsibilities include:

- Attend monthly Parent Cabinet meetings.
- Participate on Parent Cabinet sub-committees.
- Attend meetings with the Local Parent Ambassadors. The Parent Ambassadors are a part of Local Early Childhood Collaboratives (LECCs) in certain towns and work to engage families in their communities.
- Conduct community outreach in their region, which can include attending or presenting at community meetings, participating/abling at community events, organizing parent cafés or community events, and/or other activities to engage families in the region. The goal is for each member to conduct or participate in at least one outreach activity each month.
- Have opportunities to participate in other OEC and statewide groups, to participate in workshops and professional development, participate in regular check-ins with OEC staff, and to attend and/or present at state, regional, and national conferences.

Parent Cabinet Initial Meetings & Official Launch



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members

Data Collection & Invoicing for Stipends

OEC initially worked with Cabinet members and a fellow from Harvard University to develop an electronic form (via the Qualtrics software) to report on their activities each month (i.e., community outreach, meetings). This served multiple purposes. It provided a mechanism for parents to log their hours to submit for compensation, and provided feedback to OEC on outreach activities by community, and feedback on what Parent Cabinet members were hearing from parents and other stakeholders. There were challenges with the time it took to compile the data into an easily readable format, as well as into invoices for each member. This was later changed in 2023 with consultant support by Third Sector Company to help streamline by developing a spreadsheet for each member to complete monthly, and a way for that data to feed to a dashboard that summarized data and member feedback on outreach activities.

Onboarding and Launching a Parent Cabinet



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members



An official press conference announcing the CT OEC Parent Cabinet to the state was held on April 7, 2022, at the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Building. This was a celebration of the establishment of the first CT OEC Parent Cabinet and introduced the purpose of the Cabinet. The event was hosted by Design Team member Janine McMahon and keynote speakers included: Elaine Zimmerman, the Region 1 Administrator for the Administration for Children and Families; OEC Commissioner Beth Bye; and Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker from the CT State Department of Education. This was followed by stories from four Parent Cabinet members. The Governor was unable to attend due to COVID, but sent his remarks in the following press release, which also includes a quote from an inaugural Parent Cabinet member (see Appendix).

"I am grateful that this group of parents from across Connecticut are dedicating their time to ensure that families with young children have a voice in their state government," **Governor Lamont said.** "Their input will help shape the policies that are directly impacting families. We've already made very strong steps to make Connecticut one of the most family-friendly states in the country, and I look forward to seeing the contributions they can provide to make even further strides in those efforts."

"Parents and caregivers are raising children day in and day out, and the work of the Parent Cabinet helps to uplift these voices to the point where they can bring ideas, solutions, and issues regarding child care to the state level," **Symone Maguire, an inaugural Parent Cabinet member, said.** "We have the distinct honor of being vehicles and channels of resources, information, and change."

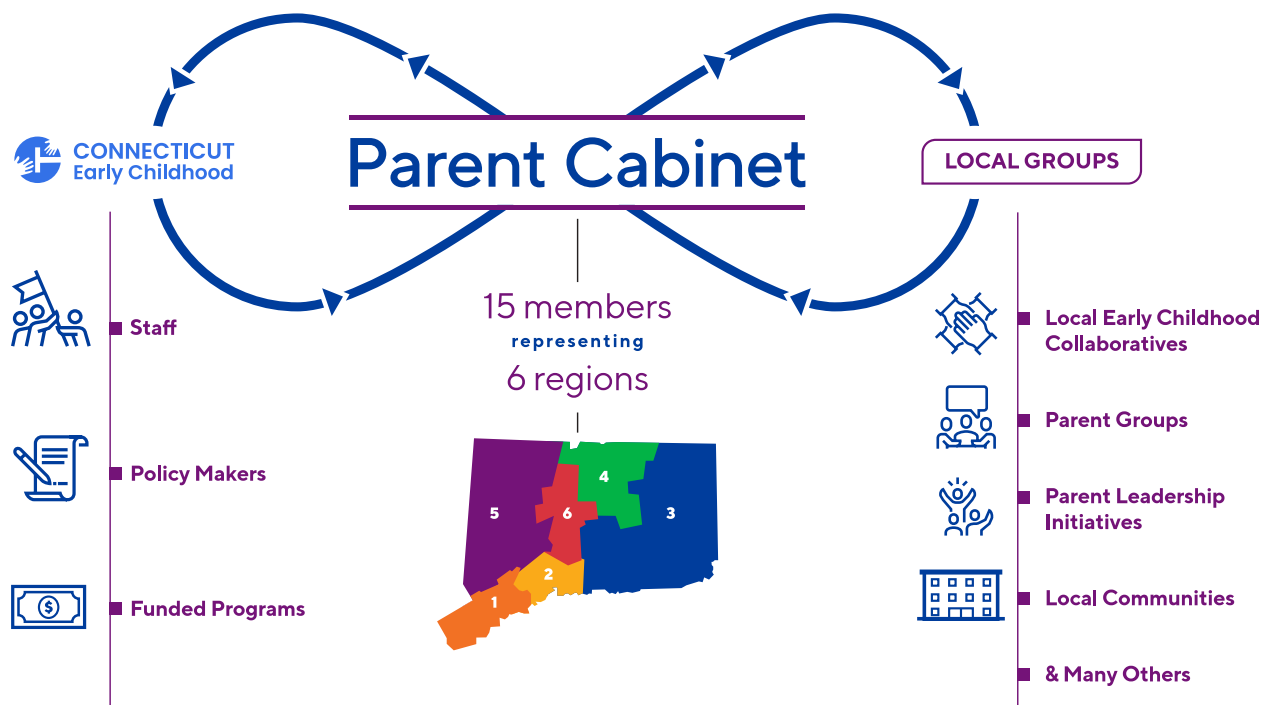
"We know the importance of parents' voices," **Office of Early Childhood Commissioner Beth Bye said.** "We are so grateful to work with the Parent Cabinet because parents have a unique understanding of community and family strengths and needs. We also know parents share resources. This partnership will ensure that policies are family-driven and not just program-driven."

Building an Effective Feedback Loop with Communities & Families

The Parent Cabinet is one component of the larger ecosystem to create effective communication feedback loops from the state level to the local level, and from the local level to the state level. The connection to local Parent Ambassadors is critical for the local-to-state feedback loop, and to hear from various parts of the region about the gaps, strengths, and opportunities for coordination across the state.

- At the local level, it's helpful for Parent Ambassadors and local early childhood leaders to have this state connection with Parent Cabinet members. Parent Cabinet members serve a key role in connecting local stakeholders to OEC – as another parent in a leadership role that parents and local stakeholders can feel comfortable connecting with, sharing what's happening in their region, and sharing concerns or things that may need to be raised up to OEC.
- Parent Cabinet members on the state level can share state-level conversations and activities with Parent Ambassadors and local leaders.

The graphic below shows the vision for the flow of these feedback loops.



Authentic Parent Leadership

In interviews with Parent Cabinet members in Fall 2023, nearly all cited authentic parent voice and leadership as a key strength. Interviewees noted how parent engagement efforts can often be a “check-the-box” exercise – where decisions have already been made and parent feedback is not truly considered.

Parent Cabinet members and OEC staff noted how parent voices have been heard and were incorporated into decisions, policies, and programs:

- “It’s been a remarkable experience. I want it replicated. There is a genuineness. Sometimes you’re on groups and it’s just for show. It’s been an authentic experience.”
- “The Blue Ribbon Panel met with us and the Parent Ambassadors and we gave feedback. You can see it shaping decisions. They are really listening to what we have to say.”
- “These conversations make systemic changes...We’re giving real feedback, based on our experiences and from asking other parents. We can give new ideas and actionable feedback.”
- “The feedback loop has been the most effective part. I’m listening to concerns of providers and families, and then bringing that back to OEC. It’s the feedback loop – taking the information and advocating for those needs.”



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members, OEC Deputy Commissioner, and Design Team Member



MARY MCCALLISTER: “We talked about developing and implementing a survey for the parents on the Cabinet at certain intervals; near the beginning of the process, midway, and towards the end. It’s important to document the impact on their social network, economically, emotionally with their confidence, building their professional skills, their workforce development. I’m sure it’s affected their relationships with their children, their schools, their teachers. Their world has just become bigger because they’re part of this. So, to be able to actually quantify this would be amazing. I think about their future and their lives and the lives of their families. Someone feels more hopeful. They can make the changes that they want to see happen in their lives or their family’s life, you know, or you can tie it to, like, the path to social economic security. You can tie it to the path of better parenting, better child care, and better community overall.”

Early Highlights & Impacts

Below are selected highlights and impacts from the first two years of the Parent Cabinet.

Served on state advisory bodies

- CT Early Childhood Cabinet
- CT Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care
- CT Birth to Three System Interagency Coordinating Council
- OEC External Steering Committee
- CT Family Bridge Advisory
- CT State Inclusion Team



“Our voices were really heard. And that made it that much easier when talking to families. You could really speak from a place of truth.”

- Krysta (Inaugural Parent Cabinet member)



Parent Cabinet Member with OEC Staff and ACF Administrator Region 1



Parent Cabinet Member and Community Members



CHENAE RUSSELL: “We’ve worked hard around getting Parent Cabinet members into other advisory bodies of the OEC or those we work closely with to continuously embed parent voice and personal experience in other structures and systems. We have a Parent Cabinet member on our CT Early Childhood Cabinet that consists of other state agencies, and the Lieutenant Governor co-chairs it with the Commissioner, and they oversee a lot of the work. We have a Parent Cabinet member on the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care to ensure we had a parent voice and to be able to funnel back to the full Parent Cabinet.

“And then we have a Parent Cabinet member on our OEC Strategic Planning External Steering Committee of trusted partners. We have a Parent Cabinet member on the CT Birth to Three Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC). We have our State Inclusion Team, which supports children with special needs or disabilities across different systems. We also just had a member added to the Family Bridge Advisory Council, which is around the Universal Nurse Home Visiting work in Bridgeport.”



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members, Design Team Members, and OEC Staff



Parent Cabinet Design Team, OEC Staff, and Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members at NAEYC Conference (2023)

Provided guidance, feedback, and expertise to OEC on many areas; some of these include:

- Developing the Governance of the Parent Cabinet, which included Bylaws, Staggering of Terms, Logic Model, Best Practices, and Handbook (2023-2024)
- Informing the Evaluation and Logic Model of the Parent Cabinet (2024)
- Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care Report (2023)
- Kindergarten age change memo to families and feedback on outreach materials (2023)
- Birth to Three Family Survey feedback (2023)
- Gave the Home Visiting team feedback on how to engage families for improvements (2023)
- Helped Score Home Visitor Awards (2022-2024)
- Child care hours (2022)
- Child care access during the transition out of the pandemic (2022)
- OEC Parent Survey co-design and outreach (2022)

Parent Cabinet members described the impacts of their engagement:

- "The state cares about parent input and what families need... The Commissioner's willingness to listen always seemed genuine. I watched her on multiple occasions when she asked a question and you could see a light bulb go off in her head. She would ask that Cabinet member to email either her or someone specific to follow up."

- “I was a big advocate for having Care 4 Kids not only cover for working parents, but also parents that are trying to pursue a degree in school, and now it’s covered.”
- “The Blue Ribbon Panel met with us and the Parent Ambassadors and we gave feedback. You can see it shaping decisions. They are really listening to what we have to say.”

Presented at national and regional meetings and conferences:

- National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference (2022, 2023)
- Preschool Development Grant (PDG) national convening (2022)
- Parent Leadership Conference (2022-2023)
- Together We Will Childhood Conversations (2023)
- East Coast CCDF (Childcare Developmental Fund) Meeting – Plenary session (2023)
- Georgia 2Gen Statewide Convening (2022-2023)
- Equity in Family Outcomes meeting with CT’s Birth to Three (Early Intervention (2023)
- CT Head Start – CT Department of Children and Families statewide meeting (2023)
- Smart Start Conference (2024)



OEC Design Team with OEC Staff

- Child Care Aware Symposium (2024)
- Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) Conference (2024)

Institutionalized in state statute:

- Legislation establishing and funding the Parent Cabinet under OEC was passed in legislative session in 2023, P.A. 23-160, Sec. 40
- Separate legislation added a Parent Cabinet member to the state's Early Childhood Cabinet



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Member and OEC Staff at CCDF East Coast Meeting Plenary



CHENAE RUSSELL: “We were fortunate that we were able to get it put into legislation last year to have the Parent Cabinet be a permanent advisory body to the OEC, and then also with that we have a budget. We now have state funds designated just for the Parent Cabinet and with a position that oversees it, and the stipends, so going forward every year, we will always have that which has been a huge help for us. With PDG funding ending, we will have those funds in the future. This is nice because designated state funds will help with sustaining it going forward.”



COMMISSIONER BETH BYE: “Part of the sustainability is we got it in the state budget, which was not easy to get it as a line item. It took a long push, and it wasn’t easy. It took a couple of years before it got in for good, so it wasn’t just grant-funded.”



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members and OEC Staff at Smart Start Conference

V. Key Practices to Guide the Work

The Parent Cabinet **Best Practices Guide** developed by members input and JDM Consultant support includes the following 10 key practices that build from the co-creation process and guide the work of the Parent Cabinet:

1. Building Strong Connections
 - Utilize diverse communication channels for effective outreach.
 - Foster an inclusive environment, respecting diverse family backgrounds.
 - Engage diverse families through targeted programs and community events.
2. Intentional Listening
 - Employ active listening and empathetic engagement techniques.
 - Facilitate focus groups and feedback sessions for comprehensive input.
 - Use surveys, interviews, and data analysis tools for informed decision making.

3. Partnering with Families and Communities

- Involve families in collaborative policymaking and program development.
- Build partnerships with community organizations for resource integration.
- Ensure equitable distribution of resources and accessibility of services.

4. Incorporating Parent Expertise

- Identify and utilize the unique skills and experiences of parents.
- Empower parents through leadership opportunities and training.
- Provide ongoing professional development and skill enhancement opportunities.

5. Ensuring Family-Driven Equitable Policies

- Develop inclusive, flexible policies centered on diverse family needs.
- Apply equity assessments in policy development and implementation.
- Evaluate policy impacts on various family groups for continuous refinement.

6. Outreach and Communication

- Ensure communication is culturally sensitive and multilingual.
- Develop strategies to reach underserved and non-participating families.
- Use various platforms for effective and inclusive communication.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Set measurable goals and track progress using key performance indicators.
- Adapt strategies based on community feedback and data analysis.
- Conduct annual reviews and prepare comprehensive reports.

8. Resource Allocation

- Apply equitable and effective strategies for resource distribution.
- Ensure budget planning is comprehensive and transparent.
- Secure funding for compensating Cabinet members and Parent Ambassadors.

9. Training and Support for Cabinet Members

- Offer ongoing professional development and training opportunities.
- Provide support systems for continued engagement and participation.
- Address barriers to participation like child care and transportation.

10. Institutionalizing the Parent Cabinet

- Draft clear legislative language to define the Cabinet's structure and role.
- Engage with policymakers and stakeholders for statutory establishment.
- Ensure operational continuity and dedicated funding in the statute.

VI. Conclusion & Lessons Learned

The co-creation process is an essential strategy for developing authentic partnerships with parents. When a state or agency engages in building trusting relationships with parents, and using their knowledge and feedback to inform policies and practices, everyone benefits. A Design Team and Parent Cabinet that reflects the state's diverse stakeholders and leads to a process of continuous improvement helps ensure programs align with what families need. We hope this toolkit inspires others to co-create a Parent Cabinet. With agencies and families working together, efforts and outcomes are stronger.

The next phase of our work is sustaining and continuing operational improvement of the Parent Cabinet, and achieving our long-term goals for parent leadership and improved ECE systems.

In interviews with OEC staff, Design Team members, and Parent Cabinet members, participants identified the following lessons learned from the establishment of the Cabinet:



MARY MCCALLISTER: "I'm hoping it has a huge impact on how this state works moving forward. Ideally, I would love it if people have legislation they're about to propose, they go and tap into a group like this and say, 'who's my end user? I want to hear from them,' right? 'Tell me how this will impact you. Tell me what is wrong with this system. Tell me how we can change it,' right? I would like the end users' voices to be louder than the lobbyists."



MAGGIE ADAIR (OEC): “Establishing the OEC Parent Cabinet in statute elevates the stature of this entity, which helps to leverage support for its ongoing sustainability. And adequate funding and staffing are essential ingredients to build momentum and to move forward with this important work.”



“I feel like we were able to grow as we thought through what the Cabinet should be. And we got opportunities to go out and meet the community, and speak in public, and go to trainings.”

– Casey, Inaugural Parent Cabinet member



Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members, OEC Staff, and Design Team Members

- **Time and staff support.** The co-creation process (both the design and start-up of the Cabinet) took much time and staff support. This included evening meetings; one-on-one check-ins with members; communications via multiple methods; time at meetings for relationship-building and discussions that engaged all members; and the time and ability OEC staff needed to translate parent feedback into actionable items for OEC.
- **Staggering terms.** After the first group was onboarded and in the role, we quickly realized staggering would be needed, and we needed to identify a process to do this thoughtfully to minimize any gaps in the work and ensure a smoother transition to learn from those currently in the role.

- **Frequent meetings and touch-points.** Originally, the Parent Cabinet planned to meet quarterly. However, since this was a new group and there was a lot happening, this was changed to virtual monthly meetings. In addition, OEC staff added one-on-one meetings to work with Parent Cabinet members individually.
- **Parents driving the agenda.** Parent Cabinet members help co-facilitate meetings to develop their leadership skills and share power. Using data from monthly reports and meeting evaluation forms, OEC staff learn what parents want to have as topics at future meetings. Meeting agendas are carefully crafted with parent facilitators to not overload the meetings or just have OEC staff talking. Meetings are designed to be collaborative, with opportunities to share and hear from members.
- **State-local communications.** Connections must be made at the local level for the state to truly understand what is happening at the local level, what the implications are when state policies are passed, and what issues different communities are facing. Parent Cabinet members can be key players in making these connections.
- **Educate members on advocacy role.** It was important for OEC to be transparent and honest with Parent Cabinet members around the role of an executive office state agency like OEC that reports to the Governor, and must maintain certain guidelines regarding supporting the Governor's bills and not advocating against them. This carries over to this type of an advisory body – members discussed how to take the "Parent Cabinet hat" off and put the "parent hat" on if advocating to the legislature.
- **Connecting activities to the mission and desired outcomes.** The Parent Cabinet has drafted a logic model to help clarify the Cabinet's desired outcomes, and ensure that they align with its mission and activities. The logic model can also be used to assess progress in achieving its mission.
- **Clear parameters.** For OEC, it's important to be clear from the agency perspective as to what the parents will be able to give feedback on or help co-develop. There may be certain activities or programs where there is a limited role for parent feedback (e.g., grants with strict federal requirements).
- **Valuing parent leadership with funding and stipends.** Participants agreed that the funding and stipends were critical to the Cabinet's success. OEC partnered with the Connecticut Children's Alliance to pay the stipends. The Children's Alliance utilized Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) funds to compensate parents for their work with the Design Team and Parent Cabinet. In addition, the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) helped fund much of the work of the Parent Cabinet, and highlighted the importance of family voice and leadership on a national level. The OEC lead for PDG funding, Lorna Thomas-Farquharson, was essential in ensuring the use of PDG for Parent Cabinet, and championed family voice throughout the development and launch of the Cabinet.

CO-CREATION ACTION STEPS:

Stage 3: Planning for Impact and Sustainability

REFLECTION

Ask yourself: How will this Council or Cabinet sustain and demonstrate impact beyond the current leadership and political will? In CT, the OEC Parent Cabinet was added to state legislation regulations and state budget to ensure sustainability, even with changes. What would work for you?

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

- ☐ Create a governance structure and succession plan for Cabinet members.
- ☐ Create a way to capture and evaluate the work of the Cabinet to tell the story of its impact to key stakeholders and to evolve the role of the Cabinet members.
- ☐ Provide compensation that validates the expertise of the parent and keeps in mind the benefits cliff.
- ☐ Create leadership pathways to continue to engage the Design Team members and Parent Cabinet members beyond the Cabinet.
- ☐ Connect this effort to other efforts around the state that are working on behalf of families with young children to maximize the collective impact of this work.
- ☐ Embed Parent Cabinet members as advisors to legislative and policymaking agencies and organizations.
- ☐ Create a sustainability plan for the Parent Cabinet.

Appendix:

FORMS, FRAMEWORKS, GUIDES

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|----|---|
| A. | Definitions and Key Terms |
| B. | Group Norms (2021) |
| C. | Parent Cabinet Application & Updated Version |
| D. | Parent Cabinet Scoring Rubric & Updated Version (2024) |
| E. | Evaluator Orientation & Facilitator Orientation |
| F. | Interview Guide, Script, and Note Template |
| G. | Parent Cabinet At-Large Data Considerations (2021) |
| H. | Parent MANIFESTO for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems – English |
| I. | Connecticut’s Definition and Framework for Family Engagement: Full, Equal, and Equitable Partnerships with Families |
| J. | CO-CREATION: Viewing Partnerships Through a New Lens |
| K. | Two-Generational Initiative (2Gen) |
| L. | Parent Leadership Training Institute |
| M. | Head Start Family and Community Engagement |
| N. | OEC 2018 Early Care and Action Plan |
| O. | CT Governor’s Blue Ribbon Plan on Child Care 2023 |
| P. | Governor Ned Lamont’s Parent Cabinet Press Release |



Parent Cabinet

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