

# **Influence of a Parent Leadership Program on Participants' Leadership Capacity and Actions**

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the influence of Parent Services Project's Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI; formerly known as Parent Leadership Institute) on parent leadership capacity and action. Pre- and post-test data were collected from new VVFLI attendees during their first ( $N = 83$ ) and last ( $N = 85$ ) session, respectively. T-tests were used to test for significant differences between the pre- and post-test survey responses. Survey data were also collected from a subset of alumni ( $N = 100$ ) who had completed at least one VVFLI between 2005 and 2008. Results indicate that VVFLI may positively influence parents' identities as leaders, general leadership and communication skills, and skills specific to school- and community-based settings, as well as promote increased parental involvement in a variety of school-based, advocacy, and wider constituency leadership activities. Schools and community-based organizations interested in strengthening the leadership capacity of parents should consider implementing parent leadership programs, such as VVFLI, with their constituents.

**Key Words:** parents, vision and voice family leadership institute, programs, capacity, parental involvement in education, engagement, schools, community-based organizations, communication skills, advocacy, training workshops

## **Introduction**

Decades of research point to the many benefits of family engagement in children's learning on student academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp,

2002). Greater family engagement is also associated with improved social skills and behavior (e.g., decreased alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior; National PTA, 1998). The benefits of family engagement are true regardless of students' socioeconomic status or ethnic/racial background or the parents' education level (Mapp, 2004). The more extensive the family engagement, the greater the student benefits (National PTA, 1998).

Parent leadership in education represents one important subtype of family engagement. It can take the form of either individual or collective action (HFRP, 2002; Levine & Trickett, 2000), including: communication and advocacy on behalf of one's own child (HFRP, 2000); authentic input, participation and leadership in parent associations or local school councils (Lopez & Kreider, 2003); and participation in community organizing for education reform (Warren, 2005). Research on parent leadership suggests that parent leaders become role models of school and community involvement not only for their own children, but for other families as well. Higher participation in school leadership councils by immigrant parents, in particular, is associated with greater teacher awareness of students' cultural and community issues and higher family engagement at the school (Marschall, 2008).

Today's educational context and policies present many structural opportunities for parent leadership in education through site-based management councils, English language advisory councils, community-organizing groups, and parent-teacher organizations. Oftentimes, however, parents may need training to acquire the leadership knowledge, self-efficacy, and skills to take on and be truly effective in such roles (Corbett & Wilson, 2000, 2001; Gertler, Rubio-Codina, & Patrinos, 2006). Studies on community leadership programs demonstrate the potential positive influence of parent leadership programs. Specifically, a review of community leadership programs concluded that such programs increase participants' leadership skills, including their ability to interact with others and their level of confidence (Earnest, 1996). Although few evaluations of parent leadership programs have been published in the scientific literature or elsewhere, the available evidence from those that have suggest that they may sustain and increase parents' involvement in their children's education; develop parents' skills in communicating with other parents and with school personnel about educational issues and school improvement efforts; create a community of parents committed to better schools; and even shift involvement from school-based to community- and systems-based reform efforts (Corbett & Wilson, 2008; Kroll, Sexton, Raimondo, Corbett, & Wilson, 2001; Lopez & Kreider, 2003).

Despite the potential benefits of parent leadership training, challenges may still exist to enacting the leadership skills gained. For example, trained parent

leaders often encounter difficulty changing school organizations and directly impacting student achievement (Corbett & Wilson, 2000). Schools and districts that provide forums and decision-making structures with authentic parent participation can result in more responsive schools and increased parent power to influence school reform (Lopez & Kreider, 2003; McConnell, 1991). Structural, pedagogical, and curricular features of effective and well-attended parent leadership training programs include highly interactive training sessions, time for parent socialization, and curricula informed by parent interests (McConnell, 1991). Given the power issues that individual change agents are likely to encounter in school settings, it may also be necessary to invest in training and supporting school leaders and teachers to partner with parents (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2005).

As interest in identifying effective strategies to promote family engagement grows, many questions remain about parent leadership programs relating to their influence on parent leadership capacities and later actions in schools and communities. This article extends our understanding of parent leadership programs by investigating the influence of a unique parent leadership institute on two interconnected types of outcomes: leadership capacity and leadership action. First, we report on immediate, short-term outcomes related to parents' leadership capacity in five domains including leadership identity, general leadership, general communication, school-based skills, and community-based skills. Second, we report on long-term outcomes related to leadership action among parents, specifically networking efforts with diverse groups of parents and participation in school and community leadership roles.

## Methods

### Program Overview

Parent Services Project (PSP) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to integrating family support, engagement, and leadership into early childhood settings, schools, and family-serving organizations through training and technical assistance. PSP offers the Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute (VVFLI), a series of 6–8 workshops designed to train and support emerging parent leaders, in a variety of settings. It draws on the universals of family support and community organizing, using an approach that is based on mutual respect, equity, shared power, and recognition of strengths. The agenda for each VVFLI varies based on local strengths, needs, and concerns; however, core topics covered include understanding family support principles and strategies, leadership qualities and goal setting, understanding and influencing systems, relational meetings, and organizing for change. Table 1 shows a sample six-session agenda.

Table 1. Sample Six–Session VVFLI Agenda

Session	Agenda
1. A Leadership Legacy: Our History and Our Stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome and orientation</li> <li>• Stories of local parent leaders</li> <li>• Why get involved in leadership? What happens as a consequence of family engagement and leadership?</li> <li>• Introduce the practice of relational meetings</li> <li>• Homework</li> </ul>
2. Families Accessing and Engaging the Education System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State, county, and district structures</li> <li>• School structure and culture</li> <li>• Parent organizations</li> <li>• What are the possibilities that exist to build real communities in childcare centers and schools?</li> <li>• Homework</li> </ul>
3. Parents As Equal Partners in Their Child’s Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your individual experience navigating your child’s school?</li> <li>• How do various tests impact our children’s education?</li> <li>• What can one do to make parent–teacher communication (including parent–teacher conferences) more productive and beneficial for children?</li> <li>• Develop strategies for individual parents and leadership groups</li> <li>• Homework</li> </ul>
4. Parents as Leaders in Their Child’s School Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why have a meeting? How do you develop the agenda? Who is involved in the development of the agenda?</li> <li>• Mediation, negotiation, arbitration, and facilitation</li> <li>• Group dynamics: managing interaction, generating ideas, and making decisions</li> <li>• From meeting agenda to community building</li> <li>• Homework</li> </ul>
5. Family Pressures, Family Engagement, and Community Organizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants learn to name what interests and concerns they have and the role that the market, government, schools, and service organizations play in the generation or elimination of pressures that families deal with daily</li> <li>• Participants will understand the value of researching information they need to have success in changing systems</li> <li>• Participants will dialogue about how community leadership intentionally brings different community groups together for common goals and actions</li> <li>• Participants will explore the process to organize a winnable action around a given issue; this will include a dialogue about various community organizing strategies</li> <li>• Homework</li> </ul>
6. Evaluation, Wrap-Up, and Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What worked? What should be changed?</li> <li>• Key lessons from the Institute</li> <li>• How parents and the community will use knowledge, skills, and relationships gained through the Institute to further their goals</li> <li>• Personal and/or group next steps</li> <li>• Celebration</li> </ul>

VVFLI sessions not only provide a space for learning, but also for reflection, networking, and action planning with other parents, as well as with school and program staff representing local partner agencies. The primary participants are parents with children ages 0-18 who have an interest in developing their capacity to engage on an equal playing field with the systems and staff who serve their children. The workshops are taught by PSP staff and local service providers who work with families.

In the seven years since its inception, VVFLI has served over 400 parents, first in PSP's local community in San Rafael, California and surrounding areas and later expanding to other sites across the country, including Atlanta, Georgia and Kansas City, Missouri. In the first year that VVFLI is offered at a new location, parent participants are recruited by the staff of local early childhood programs, schools, or community-based partner organizations. Many parent participants in subsequent years are recruited by VVFLI alumni.

### **Study Design**

In Fall 2008, PSP engaged researchers from Sociometrics Corporation to conduct an evaluation of VVFLI. The evaluation, which took place from November 2008 to August 2009, entailed an empowerment approach in that PSP staff and VVFLI alumni were involved in numerous aspects of the research study. Specifically, PSP staff provided input on the specific aims of and measures used for the evaluation, translated survey instruments into Spanish, facilitated survey data collection, entered this data into a database, and helped to interpret and disseminate study findings. In addition, four VVFLI alumni participated in a focus group to identify themes for investigation prior to the start of the evaluation and assisted with data collection.

### **Data Collection**

All parents attending VVFLI institutes in Fall 2008 in Atlanta, Georgia and Novato, Santa Clara, and San Rafael, California were asked to complete a written pre- and post-test survey during their first and final workshop session, respectively. Both surveys included questions about participants' demographics such as their role in VVFLI, education level, race/ethnicity, most commonly spoken language at home, and immigration status. Seventeen items assessed participants' leadership capacity including their perceptions of themselves as leaders; self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability) to set goals, develop and execute action plans, communicate, and work with others; school-based advocacy skills; and community change skills. Most items were carried over from an earlier evaluation instrument designed by PSP, with a few new items

added at the request of PSP staff to reflect other topics covered by the VVFLI curriculum. Participants' rated their level of agreement with each item from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The pre-test survey also inquired about participants' desired outcomes from VVFLI; additional post-test survey items assessed participant satisfaction, lessons learned from VVFLI, and future goals.

Survey data were also collected by phone from a subset of alumni who had completed at least one VVFLI institute between 2005 and 2008. PSP staff and alumni volunteers attempted to contact all 196 VVFLI alumni by phone, with at least two follow-up calls to each person. Those involved in data collection only reached out to parents they did not know in communities different than their own. The alumni survey included demographic questions identical to those collected in the pre- and post-test surveys. It also included items on participants' involvement in a variety of leadership activities, attendance at other trainings following their experience at VVFLI, and perceptions of the impact that VVFLI had on their lives. Participants were given the option to complete the pre-test, post-test, and alumni surveys in either English or Spanish.

### **Analyses**

Analyses were conducted using SPSS (version 17.0). Univariate statistics were used to examine the frequency and distributions of all study variables in the pre-test, post-test, and alumni surveys. Bivariate tests (e.g., *t*-tests) were used to test for significant differences between pre- and post-test survey responses. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## **Results**

### **Sample Characteristics**

Eighty-three and 85 new VVFLI attendees during the study period completed a pre- and post-test survey, respectively. Table 2 provides an overview of the pre- and post-test participants' characteristics. The majority of participants attended a VVFLI institute in California (88% pre-test; 79% post-test), had obtained a minimum of a high school education (73% pre-test; 75% post-test), self-identified as Latino/a (71%, pre-test; 64% post-test), primarily spoke Spanish at home (68% pre-test; 55% post-test), and had immigrated to the United States (75% pre-test; 65% post-test). Twenty-eight percent of pre-test participants had at least one young child age 0–5 years and no older children, 72% had at least one school-age child. Twenty-one percent of post-test participants had at least one young child and no older children, 79% had at least one school-age child. There were no significant differences between the pre- and post-test groups for any demographic variables.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	N(%) <sup>a</sup>		
	Recent Participants 2008-2009		VVFLI Alumni 2005-2008 (N=92)
	Pre-test (N=83)	Post-test (N=85)	
<b>Institute location</b>			
Fairfield, CA	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (10)
Novato, CA	16 (19)	19 (22)	0 (0)
Santa Clara, CA	35 (42)	31 (37)	0 (0)
San Rafael, CA	22 (27)	17 (20)	47 (51)
Atlanta, GA	10 (12)	17 (20)	16 (17)
Kansas City, MO	0 (0)	0 (0)	20 (22)
<b>Highest level of formal education</b>			
Less than high school	23 (28)	21 (25)	45 (49)
High school diploma or GED equivalent	20 (24)	24 (28)	22 (24)
2-yr associate degree or technical certificate	14 (17)	6 (7)	5 (5)
Some college	13 (16)	19 (22)	11 (12)
4-yr undergraduate degree or more	13 (16)	15 (18)	7 (8)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White	6 (7)	8 (9)	2 (2)
Black	9 (1)	14 (17)	9 (10)
Latino/a	59 (71)	54 (64)	78 (85)
Other	2 (2)	3 (4)	0 (0)
<b>Language spoken most often at home</b>			
Spanish	56 (68)	47 (55)	78 (85)
English (or English and Spanish together)	20 (24)	34 (40)	6 (7)
Other	5 (6)	3 (4)	6 (7)
<b>Immigrated to the United States</b>			
Yes	62 (75)	55 (65)	83 (90)
No	20 (24)	27 (32)	6 (7)
<b>Role at time of participation in VVFLI</b>			
Parent of young child(ren) (age 0–5) only	23 (28)	18 (21)	16 (17)
Parent of at least one school-age child	60 (72)	67 (79)	76 (83)

<sup>a</sup> Some totals do not add up to 100% due to missing data.

Ninety-two (47%) parents who had previously attended VVFLI completed an alumni survey. The majority of those who completed the survey had attended a VVFLI institute in California (61%), self-identified as Latino/a (85%), primarily spoke Spanish at home (85%), and had immigrated to the U.S. (83%). Approximately half (49%) had obtained a minimum of a high school education. At the time of their VVFLI attendance, 17% had at least one young child age 0–5 years and no older children, while 83% had at least one school-age child.

## Pre- and Post-Test Survey Results

### *Influence of VVFLI Participation on Parent Leadership Capacity*

Table 3 shows the individual item scores for new VVFLI participants' perceptions of their leadership capacity before (pre-test) and immediately after (post-test) having been through the program. VVFLI attendees who had completed the program were significantly more likely than those who were just starting the program to self-identify as a leader (4.3 versus 3.9,  $p = 0.00$ ) and to feel a sense of belonging (4.3 versus 3.8,  $p = 0.00$ ).

Table 3. Parent Leadership Capacity

Item	Mean (SD) <sup>a</sup>	
	Pre-test (N=83)	Post-test (N=85)
<b>Leadership identity</b>		
Consider myself leader in most areas of life*	3.9 (.10)	4.3 (.08)
Sense of belonging in leadership groups*	3.8 (.12)	4.3 (.08)
<b>General leadership skills</b>		
Know how to set realistic goals*	3.7 (.10)	4.2 (.08)
Able to effectively develop/follow through on an action plan*	3.9 (.11)	4.2 (.07)
<b>General communication skills</b>		
Know how to effectively gain support from family/friends	4.0 (.10)	4.1 (.10)
Able to communicate effectively with others*	4.0 (.11)	4.3 (.07)
Feel comfortable with teamwork and cooperation*	4.2 (.09)	4.5 (.07)
Able to confidently interact with different backgrounds*	4.0 (.10)	4.3 (.08)
Able to recruit parents in efforts to make change*	3.7 (.10)	4.0 (.08)
<b>School-based skills</b>		
Aware of resources to help advocate for child*	3.7 (.11)	4.3 (.09)
Know a lot of families at child's school/program*	3.6 (.12)	4.0 (.10)
Feel comfortable talking with child's teachers	4.2 (.11)	4.4 (.08)
Feel comfortable talking with child's school administrators*	4.0 (.11)	4.3 (.09)
Understand the school system and the role parents play in the system*	3.6 (.12)	4.1 (.08)
<b>Community-based skills</b>		
Have capacity to make change in the community*	3.6 (.11)	4.2 (.08)
Understand ways to build power in the community*	3.5 (.11)	4.0 (.07)
Aware of community organizing efforts*	3.8 (.12)	4.1 (.09)

\* $p < 0.05$  for mean difference between groups among all parents.

Compared to participants who were just starting VVFLI, those who had completed the program also reported significantly greater general leadership and communication skills, including: knowledge about how to set realistic goals (4.2 versus 3.7,  $p = 0.00$ ); an ability to effectively develop and follow through on an action plan (4.2 versus 3.9,  $p = 0.01$ ); an ability to communicate effectively with others (4.3 versus 4.0,  $p = 0.01$ ); comfort with teamwork and



cooperation (4.5 versus 4.2,  $p = 0.02$ ); an ability to confidently interact with parents from backgrounds different than their own (4.3 versus 4.0,  $p = 0.02$ ); and an ability to recruit other parents in efforts to make change within education or community settings (4.0 versus 3.7,  $p = 0.01$ ).

VVFLI attendees who had completed the program also reported significantly higher levels of agreement than those who were just starting out that they possess the following school-based capacities and skills: are knowledgeable about resources to help advocate for their children (4.3 versus 3.7,  $p = 0.00$ ); have relationships with a lot of other families at their child's school/program (4.0 versus 3.6,  $p = 0.03$ ); are comfortable talking with their child's school administrators (4.3 versus 4.0,  $p = 0.02$ ); and understand the school system and the role parents play in the system (4.1 versus 3.6,  $p = 0.00$ ). Finally, compared to those just beginning the program, graduates reported significantly more capacity to make change in the community (4.2 versus 3.6,  $p = 0.00$ ); understanding of ways to build power in the community (4.0 versus 3.5,  $p = 0.00$ ); and awareness of community organizing efforts (4.1 versus 3.8,  $p = 0.04$ ).

Although the mean score changes described above are seemingly small, ranging from 0.3 to 0.6, they represent an absolute change of 6–12% per item assessed. The pre-test means were negatively skewed (i.e., more responses were at the positive end of the scale) and standard deviations were small (i.e., responses were centered close to the mean), thus the absolute change is likely to be even greater.

## Alumni Survey Results

### *Influence of VVFLI Participation on Parent Leadership Action*

Table 4 details the extent to which VVFLI alumni are involved in various school or community activities and when this involvement first occurred. Half (50%) of the alumni surveyed had been involved in at least one school or community activity listed in Table 4 prior to their participation in VVFLI. Prior to their participation in VVFLI, respondents were most commonly involved in school-based activities such as being a volunteer in their children's schools (36%) and regularly participating with a school advisory group (i.e., PTA, PTO, ELAC, PAC, etc.; 22%). Activities that VVFLI alumni most commonly became involved in for the first time during or after their participation in VVFLI included these school-based activities (49% and 46%, respectively) and also advocacy activities such as building alliances with parents whose backgrounds are different than their own (68%) and recruiting other parents to make change in education or community settings (57%). Fewer VVFLI alumni reported having ever been a member of a community group or organization (33%), a school advisory group officer (31%), an officer/leader of a community

group or community organization (29%), a local school board member (17%), having informed a local elected official or policymaker of a community issue (13%), or been selected for regional and/or state committees and/or advisory groups (11%). Nonetheless, the majority of those who engaged in such activities did so for the first time during or after having completed VVFLI. Only 3% of alumni reported having never been involved in any of the activities listed prior to, during, or after their participation in VVFLI.

Table 4. Alumni Involvement in School or Community Activities

Activity	N (%) <sup>a</sup> (N = 92)		
	Never done	Started before VVFLI	Started during or after VVFLI
<b>Advocacy</b>			
Recruiting other parents to make change in education or community settings	27 (29)	11 (12)	52 (57)
Building alliances with parents whose backgrounds are different than own	17 (19)	11 (12)	63 (68)
<b>School-Based</b>			
Regularly participating with a school advisory group (i.e., PTA, PTO, ELAC, PAC, etc.)	28 (30)	20 (22)	42 (46)
Being a school advisory group officer	62 (67)	10 (11)	18 (20)
Being a volunteer in child's school	11 (12)	33 (36)	45 (49)
<b>Wider Constituency Involvement</b>			
Being a local school board member	74 (80)	7 (8)	8 (9)
Being selected for regional and/or state committees and/or advisory groups	81 (88)	1 (1)	9 (10)
Being a member of a community group or community organization	61 (66)	6 (7)	24 (26)
Being an officer/leader of a community group or community organization	64 (70)	3 (3)	24 (26)
Informing local elected official/policymaker of a community issue	79 (86)	2 (2)	10 (11)

<sup>a</sup>Some totals do not add up to 100% due to missing data.

*Influence of VVFLI on Parents' Participation in Other Training Programs*

Since completing VVFLI, the majority of alumni (64%) report having been involved in at least one type of other formal training; 34 (37%) had been involved in two or more. Types of additional training obtained by VVFLI alumni included leadership training offered by another organization (38%); training through another PSP initiative (34%); community agency trainings (32%); school, district, or state level education classes (29%); and college and

university classes (17%). The majority of alumni who pursued additional training reported that their experience at VVFLI had an impact on their decision to do so (90%-100%, depending on the type of training).

### *Alumni's Perceptions of the Impact of VVFLI Training on Their Lives*

Ninety-eight percent of VVFLI alumni reported that VVFLI had an impact on six or more of the following aspects of their lives (between 91%–98% for each): level of support from people and groups; communication with child's teacher and school leaders; network of other parents; network of others whose cultural backgrounds are different from own; participation as a leader in school and community groups; own education and professional development; self-esteem and confidence; sense of power to make change in the community; and level of knowledge about leadership. The remaining 2% did not respond to this series of questions.

## **Discussion**

Results of the evaluation reveal that VVFLI may have a positive influence on parents' leadership capacity in terms of their identity as a leader, their general leadership and communication skills, and their skills specific to school- and community-based settings. Although a positive trend was observed, VVFLI participation was not significantly associated with improvement in two areas of parental leadership capacity measured: knowing how to effectively gain support from family/friends, and feeling comfortable talking with their child's teachers. It may be that seeking support from and feeling comfort around certain stakeholders depends heavily on variables outside the reach of a parent leadership institute, for example, the disposition and openness of these other stakeholders.

The majority of VVFLI alumni report having carried out a variety of leadership actions since attending the program. In addition to school-based activities that parents might be expected to become involved in on their own, a subset of VVFLI alumni also became involved in advocacy activities and wider constituency involvement, for example, actively recruiting other parents to make change or serving on a regional advisory committee. These results are consistent with those from another parent leadership evaluation study which found that with training, parents' involvement in educational activities expanded from being school-based (e.g., PTA membership and participation on school-based decision-making councils) to also include community- and educational system-based efforts (e.g., advocacy and joining policy and advisory groups with broader constituencies; Corbett & Wilson, 2008). Alumni survey findings

related to parent actions also align with the areas of leadership knowledge demonstrated through the pre-post VVFLI survey, warranting further research. For example, are perceptions of school-based communication skills gained through VVFLI directly related to school-based actions reported later, including classroom volunteering and participation in school groups, and are perceptions of increased skills in making community-based change predictive of greater participation and leadership in community organizations down the road?

Limitations of the evaluation include the small sample size, lack of a control group, and cross-sectional nature of the study. Survey questions also relied on self-report from a self-selected group of participants, thus may be subject to social desirability or selection bias. Having had PSP staff and alumni conduct the alumni surveys may have likewise led to some response bias. To better address issues of generalizability, causality, and persistence of outcomes, future evaluation research on VVFLI and other parent leadership programs might include an increased sample size, a random controlled trial design, and a pre-, post-, and six-month follow-up design with identical knowledge and action constructs, including observational measures of leadership abilities, assessed at each time point. In addition, a larger and stratified sample may allow for investigation of the differential influence of VVFLI on subgroups of participants. For example, future research might examine whether first-time parents and new immigrants, for whom engagement with schools or U.S. schools, respectively, is an unfamiliar endeavor, benefit more from VVFLI than other parent subgroups in outcome areas such as parent–teacher and parent–administrator communication.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that the Vision and Voice Family Leadership Institute may influence many areas of parent leadership capacity and action targeted by the initiative. Given that VVFLI holds potential for increasing parents' leadership knowledge and skills, and, at least by retrospective account, appears to influence parents' later leadership actions, schools and community-based organizations interested in strengthening the leadership capacity of parents might consider implementing VVFLI with their constituents. VVFLI may be especially appropriate for contexts and populations with a demonstrated need for leadership training, such as schools with relatively low levels of family engagement, parent populations historically marginalized from educational systems, or parent representatives on school-based leadership and advisory councils.

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