

For Parents, a Can-Do Spirit That's Catching

Institute Gives Diverse Participants A Newfound Voice in Schools, Community

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Cathy Santiago used to sit in the back of the room at PTA meetings at her son's school, often the only Hispanic parent there. She dutifully took notes on everything. She wanted to be part of the school, of her community, but she felt intimidated. She worried about her English. "I'm just a parent," she would say. So she never raised her hand. Never said a word.

Then last September, Santiago saw a flier in her son's backpack about a new program. "Do you want to be an advocate for your children?" it read. "Do you sometimes feel defeated by the 'system?'" "Do you think parents can make good leaders?"

She found herself answering yes to all three questions. So she filled out an application, went through an interview and won a spot in a day-long retreat and 20 weeks of intensive, free classes for the city's first Parent Leadership Training Institute.

The institute, modeled after a long-running program in [Connecticut](#), bills itself as nothing short of a means to reinvigorate democracy. The idea is to take 25 parents from different backgrounds -- socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, geographic -- and help them unlock their passions for making the world better for their children. And then teach the parents the skills to make that happen.

For Santiago, the experience has been transforming.

A tutoring program in reading that she created as part of the institute won an award from Alexandria City Public School Partners in Education. She sits on two of the school system's advisory committees and has been chosen to serve on the superintendent's group studying the achievement gap. She wrote a letter to the editor for a class assignment, and it was published.

And she has found her voice at PTA meetings.



Cathy Santiago, here with son Raymond Collazo, 15, graduated from the Parent Leadership Training Institute. (By Lois Raimondo -- The Washington Post)

"Now I'm not scared," Santiago said. "I can advocate for my child. I know how to approach people who may be different, but know that we're all working toward the same goal."

Finding Common Ground

Hers is one of many transformations. Other parents who once felt like overwhelmed outsiders are now serving on multicultural committees at their jobs, starting nationwide Internet support groups for single parents, creating community newsletters, adopting neighborhood parks, and organizing child-care and parent groups for their apartment complexes. Institute graduate Bill Campbell has announced his intention to run for the School Board in 2009.

"The institute helped me to step up and step out," said graduate Marilyn Bryant, who is planning to become a parent advocate for neglected and abused children.

Gloria Spottswood is now active in lobbying for pedestrian safety in the city's West End near Landmark Mall where her 17-year-old daughter works. For her, the most powerful part of the institute was learning to listen to and work with people very different from her. "I learned that no matter where we come from -- race, creed, color -- every one of us wants the same thing. We want safe places to live, good neighborhoods and good schools," she said. "We came from [Africa](#) and Spanish-speaking countries. We were Caucasian and African American. But no matter what our preconceived notions about each other were, we always came to common ground. There was real intensity in that."

Eleven students who graduated from the institute in May are serving on citywide boards and commissions, such as the school system's Minority Achievement Committee and the city's Law Library Board and Social Services Advisory Board.

"The group that walked in in September was very different from the one that left in May," said institute coordinator Fay D. Slotnick. "They really had found their voices. They had a sense that they had rights, and they knew how to solve problems and how to do it in a noncombative way.

"One of the exercises we do is to have everyone give a speech at Week 10 and again at Week 20. The difference in the speeches was remarkable. You could see the growth and self-assurance."

But it took a lot of work for all of them to get there. Every Friday night for 20 weeks, participants attended classes led by trained facilitators at the Minnie Howard School, with such titles as "How to Define a Problem and Work Toward a Solution," "Learning How a Community Works," "Language: Packaging and Moving Agendas" and "Budgets -- From Wallets to State -- It's All Money and Priorities." The institute provided free meals before class and child care, if needed.

Participants learned about networking, whom to call to get answers and how to work with the opposition. They each took on a civic project and met with mentors. They read thick briefing books and policy papers and listened to speakers such as state Del. Adam P. Ebbin (D-Alexandria) talk about how government works.

Santiago realized that she was most concerned about her son Raymond Collazo, 15, then an eighth-grader at Hammond Middle School. He was reading below grade level. Although he qualified for special services from a reading specialist, she worried that it wasn't enough. He tried an after-school reading program for boys, but it didn't work.

So for her project, she came up with the idea of reading tutors for small, intimate groups of children. She called it LIPS -- Learning Is Personal Success -- and developed an [Andy Warhol](#)-esque logo of brightly colored lips. "I wanted something catchy for the kids," she said.

The hardest part of the project was picking up the phone to get started. "It was crazy," she said. "I had no idea what I was getting into." But with the help of a mentor, she began dialing the city's volunteer coordinator, the school's reading specialist and the principal. She put up notices at churches to solicit tutors. Slowly but surely, the program began to take shape.

She found four tutors who were available after school -- two of them fellow students at the institute, one a college student and one a PTA parent. The school provided her with a list of eight students who needed extra help, snacks, a room and a promise that the late-activity bus would wait to take the students home. The reading specialist put on a workshop to train the tutors, and the 10-week program took off.

"It was real fun," said Santiago's son. "I learned a lot. Now I feel ready for ninth grade."

The students met in small groups with tutors. They read aloud, something Raymond Collazo had always hated but found he liked in such an intimate setting. They played reading and vocabulary games. They brought in mystery and action books that captured Collazo's attention. They talked about the stories.

Now, with Raymond at Minnie Howard this fall, Santiago is looking for ways to move the LIPS program there or become involved in expanding existing tutoring programs. And she is determined to reach out to more Hispanic parents. "We need to be part of the bigger group of involved parents," she said. "We need to learn that giving our input is important . . . that telling about our experience is what policymakers need to hear."

A Need for New Perspectives

Bringing the Parent Leadership Training Institute to [Alexandria](#) was one of the last things that former City Council member Joyce Woodson did before her term ended. And she is convinced it was exactly what the city needed.

"My greatest fear in Alexandria was the growing loss of diverse voices. I use that word not to indicate nationality . . . or racial diversity -- but just plain diversity in voices," Woodson said. "As a member of the council, sitting in that chamber, it was the same people who came before us all the time. That's all we heard from.

"The only time we heard from a different group was during the budget session," she added. "And by then, it was too late. You can't stand up to policymakers one time a year and say, 'I think you need to pay attention to X.' It doesn't work that way. So I thought that anything that was going to provide a logical approach to teaching advocacy skills to a new and, quite frankly, broader range of voices, was an excellent idea. It was exciting, really."

Woodson helped secure a \$10,000 start-up grant from the city and a matching grant of \$30,000. She wooed local sponsors such as the Hotel Monaco and the Hoffman Management Co. to come up with the matching funds. And she arranged for Hopkins House, a nonprofit group that serves disadvantaged children, to provide technical support such as grant writing.

Over the years, Woodson had heard about other parent training programs, but they mostly consisted of parents coming in and getting talked at, she said. "Garbage in, garbage out," as she put it. But in 2003, at a conference of city officials, Woodson heard Elaine Zimmerman speak, and she was electrified.

Zimmerman started the Parent Leadership Training Program in Connecticut 15 years ago. Now there are institutes in 14 Connecticut cities, and hundreds graduate every year at a big ceremony at the state capitol. Three former students serve in the state legislature; others are on city councils and school boards. And graduates have logged more than 1.5 million volunteer hours working to make their communities better.

"The idea emerged because parents were truly missing from the table in public policy discussions," Zimmerman said. "They've been marginalized across class and education levels. But real and positive child outcomes will not be sustainable without the family behind them."

As executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, Zimmerman began holding focus groups with parents. Just when they started brainstorming and tossing out ideas about changes they'd like to see, they'd stop themselves, deflated, and say, "But I'm just a parent."

So she set out to change that attitude and set up an institute that would teach parents about how the system works, how to become part of it and how to promote change.

"Most people, when they think about parent engagement, it's all about raising extra money. And while that's important, it's not connected to something critical, like the achievement gap," Zimmerman said. "Parents, when they truly understand the public policy issues, discourse and accountability and outcomes, they are able to participate on a

very different level. And in truth, they're able to offer views that are very helpful to rounding out public policy goals."

Zimmerman bristles at the perception that many parents, particularly those from low-income or minority backgrounds, aren't interested and aren't involved. The institute proves that's a myth, she said,. "If you teach the skills of democracy and change with respect, and when you show context for how to use it, parents come out of the woodwork, across race and class," she said.

So instead of the defeatist phrase "I'm just a parent," the institute's slogan is, "It's amazing what one parent can do."

Applications Welcomed

This fall, applications for the Alexandria institute are again slated to go home in student backpacks, and 25 new parents will be chosen.

Graduate Marilyn Bryant, who once felt out of place at the T.C. Williams PTA, will be interviewing applicants. Graduate Gloria Spottswood, who now serves on business and transportation groups in the [West End](#), will help provide dinner. And Kimberly Neill, who organized a support network at her apartment complex for parents to pass on gently used toys, clothes and household items, will provide child care.

"They've discovered this sense of *can do*," Woodson said. "How cool is that?"

Fay Slotnick is accepting applications for this year's Parent Leadership Training Institute until mid-September. For more information, call 703-739-0233, e-mail info@plti-alex.org or visit <http://www.plti-alex.org>.