



SYSTEMIC PARENT ENGAGEMENT: FROM LISTENING TO LEADERSHIP

ALECIA MURRAY | AUGUST 2026

INTRODUCTION

What if the people most impacted by child care and early education policies helped design them?

My participation in the **CLASP Child Care and Early Education Policy Fellowship for Parents** and my work with the **Ohio Parent Advocacy Network (OPAN)** have given me firsthand knowledge about what changes when parents are not just consulted but centered. Families bring expertise that data alone cannot capture: lived experience, real-time problem solving, and a clear understanding of what is and is not working.

Through OPAN's Parent Program Initiative, parents and caregivers are empowered to become advocates for Head Start and early childhood education at the local, state, and national levels. The program focuses on leadership development, storytelling, advocacy training, and building relationships. Parents are encouraged to share their Head Start stories, participate in advocacy opportunities, and serve as voices for children, families, and communities across Ohio.

The program also emphasizes self-growth and leadership development through training opportunities focused on communication, advocacy, personal development, and understanding the

broader early childhood landscape. Through this work parents are not only encouraged to speak up but are equipped with the skills and confidence to lead.

This brief explores why systemic parent engagement is essential, how gaps at the federal level impact families locally, and why solutions like a state-level Parent Cabinet could transform how policy is shaped. This transformation is needed, because when parents move from being heard to having influence, systems do not just improve- they become more equitable, responsive, and effective.

WHY SYSTEMIC PARENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Parent engagement is often treated as an add-on: a survey here, a listening session there. But systemic parent engagement goes further. It means embedding parent voice into decision-making structures at every level including local, state, and federal systems.

This matters because policies that lack parent input often fail families. Parents are the ones experiencing barriers in real time, whether that takes the shape of accessing affordable child care, navigating special education services, or communicating with providers and schools.

Through **OPAN's work** with the "I Have a Voice" campaign, which was developed through the UPLAN Campaign Learning and Action by Parents grant, we conducted listening sessions across Ohio. "I Have a Voice" was OPAN's first advocacy campaign, and it identified one consistent barrier that families face: communication. The communication barriers that we identified include communication between parents and legislators; families and school; within Individualized Education Programs (IEPs); and during key transitions, such as moving from early childhood to school age and going from school to adulthood. Communications gaps that occur during these times and in these spaces aren't isolated issues. They are systemic failures.

One parent from a listening session shared:

"This session appears to be a valuable session - it's clear that concerns exist and are not being heard or addressed in many cases. Ideally, an agency or system could be in place to hear these concerns and support and advise a parent, possibly even advocate for them if needed."

This reflection captured a larger theme that emerged throughout the sessions and demonstrates why parent voice cannot be treated as an afterthought. Without parent perspectives informing decisions, systems remain fragmented, inequitable, and difficult to navigate. Parents want meaningful systems of support, communication, and advocacy that continue beyond a single conversation.

FEDERAL CONTEXT: PROGRESS AND GAPS

At the federal level, programs like the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start emphasize family engagement. However, engagement is often defined narrowly and focused on program-level involvement rather than policy-level decision making.

Through the CLASP fellowship, I learned how federal policy is shaped, from bill development to appropriations to implementation. While there are opportunities for advocacy, there is no consistent, structured requirement to ensure parents- especially those with lived experience in under-resourced communities- are part of policymaking spaces.

In addition, historical inequities rooted in race, gender, and economic status continue to shape today's systems. Policies have not always been designed with marginalized families in mind, leading to disparities in access, affordability, and quality of care.

All of this combines to create a critical gap: families are impacted by federal decisions but are rarely positioned to influence them directly.

STATES ARE LEADING THE WAY

In the absence of strong federal structures for systemic parent engagement, **states** are innovating.

Ohio is one example. Through OPAN's work, parents are not only sharing their experiences but organizing, identifying common challenges, and advocating for change. The "I Have a Voice" campaign demonstrates that when parents are given the space to connect and learn from one another, they become powerful agents of change.

Rather than having solutions handed to us, parents led the work of gathering input, identifying priorities, and determining what meaningful change could look like. Through that process, the idea of a Parent Cabinet emerged directly from parent voices. This experience reinforced the importance of parent-led advocacy and demonstrated how lived experience can help shape policy solutions.

During the CLASP fellowship, I also learned the importance of data and storytelling in advocacy. Parents bring both: lived experience that highlights gaps and real-world examples that make data meaningful. Together, these tools can influence policy in ways that, separately, they cannot.

THE CASE FOR A PARENT CABINET

One of the most impactful solutions is the creation of a state-level Parent Cabinet. This isn't just another advisory group; it's a structure for shared leadership

This idea came out of the "I Have a Voice" campaign. During listening sessions, parents consistently expressed feeling unheard, disconnected from decision-making processes, and uncertain about where to turn when challenges arise. Many families shared that communication barriers often leave them navigating complex systems without enough support, guidance, or opportunities for meaningful input.

A Parent Cabinet would:

- Include diverse parent voices from across the state.
- Represent different communities, backgrounds, and lived experiences.
- Provide direct input to legislators and policymakers.
- Serve as an ongoing, structured mechanism for engagement rather than a one-time consultation.
- Help families better understand how policy decisions are made and how to engage in those processes.

This model moves beyond listening sessions and toward shared leadership. It ensures that communication flows both ways: policymakers hear directly from families, and families become active partners in identifying challenges and developing solutions.

Other states, such as **Connecticut** and **Wisconsin**, have already begun implementing parent or caregiver advisory structures. These examples show that this model is both possible and effective.

Ohio's Parent Cabinet could be housed within a state agency or connected to the Governor's office, with dedicated funding to support parent participation. This would help ensure sustainability while also supporting accessibility needs such as transportation, child care, translation services, and leadership development opportunities so that parents from all communities can fully participate.

From my experience in the fellowship, particularly through learning how bills are passed, I realized how critical timing, relationships, and knowledge are in influencing policy. A Parent Cabinet could help prepare and position parents to engage effectively in these processes while also allowing policymakers to stay connected to the day-to-day realities of their constituents.

As our campaign work continues, I am also gathering information and learning from organizations in other states that are implementing similar parent engagement and advisory structures. Understanding how other states support parent voice is helping strengthen our efforts in Ohio and reinforcing that families across the country are identifying many of the same challenges.

A Parent Cabinet works because it addresses the root issue identified in the listening sessions: communication. It creates a system where communication is built into decision-making rather than treated as an afterthought. Parent Cabinets would also ensure that parent engagement is not reactive or temporary, but embedded into how policies are discussed, developed, and implemented from the beginning.

THE POWER OF PARENT-TO-PARENT CONNECTION

Another key takeaway from the fellowship was the importance of connection. I was able to deeply engage with the experience of the other fellow in my cohort, **Lily Marquez**. Hearing her story and learning about her work and perspective was incredibly impactful and reinforced how much parents can learn from one another when given the space to connect.

That experience led me to seek out more connections. I asked my mentors to share their own journeys, and those sessions became very meaningful parts of the fellowship. Learning about their paths, challenges, and successes expanded my understanding of advocacy and leadership in a way that no policy document ever could.

Hearing how they navigated obstacles, built relationships, and created change over time helped me realize that effective advocacy is not just about understanding policy. It is also about persistence, collaboration, and the ability to bring people together around a shared vision. Their experiences reinforced the idea that leadership takes many forms and that lived experience can be one of the most powerful tools for creating meaningful change.

Both the OPAN fellowship and the CLASP fellowship reinforced that advocacy is not only about understanding policy. It is also about confidence, self-awareness, relationship-building, and learning how to effectively use your voice to support other families and communities.

This is not just a fellowship insight. It is a systems insight.

When parents and leaders are connected:

- They share resources and strategies.
- They build collective knowledge.
- They strengthen advocacy efforts.
- They reduce isolation.

These connections create a ripple effect. When parents learn from one another and from those who have navigated systems before them, they become more confident, more informed, and more empowered to engage in policy and advocacy spaces.

Systemic parent engagement must include intentional opportunities for relationship building, spaces where parents can hear each other's stories, learn from experienced leaders, and grow together. This kind of connection transforms individual voices into collective power.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen systemic parent engagement nationwide, federal policymakers can:

1. Incentivize State-Level Parent Cabinets

Provide funding and guidance for states to establish and sustain Parent Cabinets tied to child care and early education systems.

2. Embed Parent Leadership in Federal Programs

Expand requirements within programs like CCDBG to include parent representation in decision-making bodies, not just advisory roles.

3. Invest in Parent Capacity Building

Fund training and leadership development opportunities so parents can effectively engage in policy discussions.

4. Prioritize Data Equity and Lived Experience

Ensure that data collection efforts include qualitative insights from families, especially those from historically marginalized communities.

5. Strengthen Communication Infrastructure

Support systems that improve communication between families, providers, and policymakers while recognizing communication as a foundational issue.

FROM VOICE TO POWER

Systemic parent engagement is about more than being heard. It is about having influence. Families already hold the expertise. What is missing is the structure to ensure that expertise shapes the systems designed to serve them.

My work with OPAN and my experience in the CLASP fellowship have shown me what is possible when parents are brought together, supported, and empowered. I did not come into this work as a policymaker. I came into it as a parent trying to navigate systems that were not built with families like mine in mind.

What I have learned is this: these systems do not work without us.

We are in a critical moment. The decisions being made today will shape child care and early education for years to come, yet families are still too often excluded from the conversations that directly impact them. Parents are not just sharing stories. They are identifying barriers, building connections, and offering solutions grounded in lived experience.

If we are serious about building equitable systems, we have to stop designing for parents and start building with them.

The next step is to make systemic parent engagement the norm, not the exception. By building systems that center parent voices at every level, we can create a child care and early education landscape that is more equitable, responsive, and effective for all.

Do not just invite parents into the room. Build the room with them. Because when parents have a seat at the table, systems do not just improve. They transform.

Guest author **Alecia Murray** was part of CLASP 2025-2026 Child Care and Early Education Policy Fellowship for Parents Cohort. More information about the fellowship program can be found [here](#).