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Spring 2017

### Rhetoric is not Reality: How Policymakers, Professionals and Parents Define Parental Engagement

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# Rhetoric is not Reality:

## How Policymakers, Professionals, and Parents Define Parental Engagement

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Janine McMahon, a mother of two children, moved to Connecticut three years ago and had difficulties navigating a complicated social services system. Ms. McMahon felt as if she was being bounced from one place to another and knocking on ten different doors to be able to obtain the proper services for herself and her family. For example, childcare was on one side of town, while job training at the same time was on another side. To help solve the problem of Ms. McMahon and Connecticut's many other low-income parents, the state created a pilot program called 2-gen, designed to connect social services for low-income people in two generations: both the child and the adult. This new initiative addresses childcare, job training, transportation and other needs for a family's overall success by breaking down silos between social service programs and providing a holistic approach to care. The pilot program was established through collaboration between policymakers, professional staff, and parents, who won support for this new program in the state legislature in 2015.

A key element to the 2gen program is parental engagement in the planning and implementation process of the program and services. Without the shared experiences from passionate parents like Ms. McMahon, the 2gen program would neglect the very voices programs often leave unheard. With a new innovative 2gen system passed into law in 2015, policymakers and professionals attempted to bring a new voice to the table with low-income parents. My research question asks: how is parental engagement defined by three groups of people (policymakers, professionals, and parents) involved in the 2gen decision and planning process, and how do they explain why it matters to them?

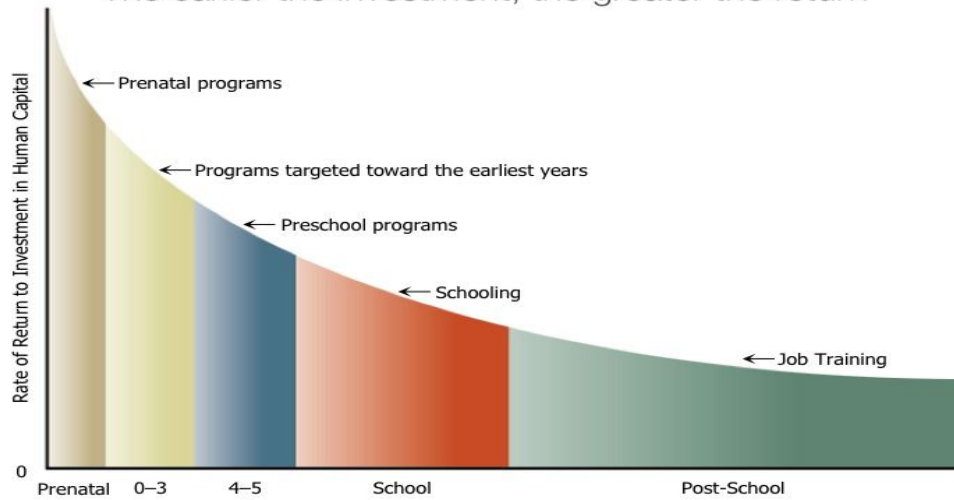
Overall, this interview-based study concludes that policymakers, professionals, and parents agree on defining parental engagement in 2gen as “story telling”. But the three groups differ on the role that parents should play as leaders in the decision-making process and the necessity for training them in order to have successful parental engagement . First, on the topic of voice, most policymakers and professionals agree that local parental engagement has more possibility for sustainability than state level parental engagement. Yet policymakers and professionals disagreed on the level to which parents should have the ability to be leaders. While some policymakers had high aspirations for parent leadership, many professionals contended that training alone would be insufficient, and that professionals are necessary to refine parent recommendations. Second, on the importance of parental engagement, all three groups value parental engagement because it incorporates a low-income, predominantly minority voice into conversations that typically have been dominated by white middle class professionals. These three groups also agree that parental engagement is a smart investment because it calls directly on the user for effective programming. But some interviewees criticized agencies for not yet embracing parental voice and continuing to operate as they have done in the past. This essay concludes with policy recommendations that address aligning a clear definition and expected outcome for successful parental engagement across all stakeholders.

## **2gen Context:**

Parental engagement is broadly defined, but in essence, it is created to develop parental control and agency over their own family's well-being—both economically and educationally for their children. This can manifest itself in many different ways, and my research is focused on analyzing shared meanings of parental engagement, but also where policymakers, professionals and parents may have different interpretations of what it means to have parental engagement in a social program. Two-generational policy, or more commonly referred to as 2gen, intentionally brings child and adult services together for a coordinated social services approach. States such as Utah have worked with Ascend and the Annie E Casey Foundation to adopt 2gen models, but Connecticut was the first state to pass a bill into law surrounding a 2gen approach. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a leader in 2gen research and advocacy, summarizes the program into three major components: “1) Provide parents with multiple pathways to get family-supporting jobs and achieve financial stability, 2) Ensure access to high quality early childhood and enriching elementary school, 3) Equip parents to better support their children socially and emotionally and to advocate for their kids education” ([The Annie E Casey Foundation Policy, 2014](#)). To accomplish the three missions, a key component of 2gen policy is incorporating parents' voices throughout the process to engage them as leaders in the community and within their family unit. Both Annie E Casey Foundation and other leaders in 2gen believe that putting families at the center of decision making in this new type of work will lead to be results.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS A SMART INVESTMENT

The earlier the investment, the greater the return



Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

### **(Return of Investment Graph, James Heckman 2012)**

Many conventional social service programs target funding and services to either parents or children. But 2gen differs by bringing the services together and addressing the family as an entire unit. Scholars like James Heckman have argued the different economic impacts of services depending on age. The highest return on investment occurs when services are targeted at the youngest possible individuals, while programs like job training yield the lowest return of investment (Heckman, 2006). Therefore, Heckman argues that the best investment is on the youngest individuals; however, Heckman does not research the effects that an investment has on a family as a unit. 2gen is attempting a new model, instead of just investing in a siloed model, both parent and child are targeted in a holistic approach. While Heckman shows the rate of returns

of an individual, the impacts of investing on an overall family are new and will possibly be discovered through a 2gen system.

**Senate Bill 795:**

In 2015, Senate Bill 795, “An Act Concerning a Two-Generational School Readiness and Workforce Development Pilot Program,” officially made Connecticut the first state to have a bill specifically focused on a two-generational policy and framework (Connecticut General Assembly, 2015). The bill focuses on families as a unit, with services and data collection of children and parents to see how the entire family fares through the process. The integrated service model provides family resources involving housing, transportation, public health, corrections, education, early childhood, by crossing “silos” for more efficiency. Policymakers and professionals are now being asked to shift the way they operate in order to adopt the 2gen initiative. This change is focused around the feedback and input from parents as partners within the process in the form of parental engagement.

One major component of 2gen in the Connecticut context is parental engagement. Parental engagement in 2gen was designed to create family centered programs instead of having policymakers and professionals assume what parents wanted. One of the major mission statements stated at the end of 2gen legislation is to “encourage strong parent involvement strategies as partners and assets including parent input into the design and implementation of two-generational plans, peer to peer supports, parent education, and social and emotional supports to meet the health and development needs of their children and themselves” (State of Connecticut Two

Generational Interagency Working Group through the Connecticut Commission of Children, 2016).

Although 2gen is not the first program to establish a parental engagement component, it is one that directly calls for parental engagement in the legislation and has had stakeholders vocalize a commitment to hearing and empowering parent voices through participation and decision making. Parental engagement is a broad term with multiple definitions and expectations, so it is important to analyze past experiences to help understand future success.

### **Literature Review:**

Some barriers for effective parental engagement are education, trust and social connections. Building on the cycle of engagement argument, Steve Johnson—who has a background in nonprofit work before his doctorate—wrote an analysis that states that education is the most important factor in social capital and engagement (Johnson, 1999). Education also determines trust and membership to different groups in a variety of ways (Johnson, 1999). Low education level can in turn lead to parents feeling incapable of participating confidently in social program decision-making. One of the biggest factors is trust within the setting, because a parent is most likely to participate when they feel safe and trust the environment they are in (Johnson, 1999). Without trust, no matter how great a program may be, parents may not engage because of the possible restrictions they may feel are placed on them by possible intimidation to engage. These possible limitations need to be met with strategic ways of incorporating



parents in a parent-focused way. Johnson's analysis is based on his background as a service provider and he suggests that the guidelines described should be used when considering policy and programs. My research is new in that it looks at three different groups of policymakers, professionals and parents to develop definitions surrounding parental engagement. While Johnson's work helps build definitions from a service provider, my research looks across three groups to address similarities and differences. Like Johnson, my research looks into core aspects of trust and environments that foster parental engagement, but by talking directly with three groups. My interview-driven research asks questions to look at where and how parental engagement is happening.

The research that currently exists around parental engagement often circulates around the relationship between school and parent. Harvard education professor Karen Mapp and her co-author Soo Hong looked to debunk the myth surrounding "hard to reach" parents. These parents were predominantly identified as "poor families, families with limited levels of education, families of color, families who first language is not English, and recent immigrants" (Mapp & Hong, 2009). These groups are almost identical to the groups that the 2gen initiative serves and looks to incorporate into its parental engagement model. All of the labeled groups are often seen as uncaring or unable to participate in the well-being or education of their child (Mapp & Hong, 2009). However, through a neighborhood group in Boston, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) views parents as assets and leaders that are partners in their child's success with teachers and schools (Mapp & Hong, 2009). This research continues its analysis of parent and school relationships as difficult, but still capable of being a

two-way effective trusting partnership. This research consisted of interviews, observations, focus groups and document analysis, and identified a key vessel for parental engagement in LSNA (Mapp & Hong, 2009). Mapp suggests the role of parental engagement is seen with interactions between children, teachers and parents, and my research examines a larger holistic model with policymakers and service providers as well. Ultimately, my research within 2gen moves Mapp's past assuming parental engagement is between parents and schools, but also with policymakers and professionals as well.

To examine parental engagement practices, one model that actively fosters and engages parents while also developing staff and evaluating successes is the Community Engaged Parent Education(CEPE). This program is located in the midwest and was researched by a group lead by William Doherty, Director of the Citizen Professional Center, Family Social Science Department at University of Minnesota (Doherty, Jacob & Cutting, 2009) . This research is similar to mine because they both identify perceptions of parental engagement and why it matters. In the Community Engaged Parent Education model, parents come together through what is defined as a “democratic process” that allows parents to see themselves as “Co-builders” (Doherty, Jacob & Cutting, 2009). Parents in this program come together and are part of classes that are semi-structured, but also driven by parent needs. Parents determine an issue that should be addressed in their community, then work with staff to research, prepare and enact change in the community (Doherty, Jacob & Cutting, 2009). The staff goes through extensive training that requires over a year of interning before they can become

facilitators of these small group meetings (Doherty, Jacob & Cutting, 2009). This is crucial because as much as the parents need help sifting through some of the processes explained, the staff cannot be expected to effectively engage parents without first learning and practicing techniques and strategies to work as “co-builders”. This research focuses on a local program's ability to engage parents effectively, which is similar to Connecticut’s Parent Leadership Training Institute, that helps foster parental engagement within 2gen. Doherty, Jacob and Cutting look at reports and use a predominantly ethnographic approach, whereas my study asks directly the definition and importance of parental engagement.

Both the studies done by Mapp and Hong (2009) and Doherty, Jacob and Cutting (2009) credit the success of parental engagement to an established organization within a community; therefore, my research within 2gen that represents established organizations such as Catholic Charities in Hartford is set up for possible success as well. My research does not examine the success of Catholic Charities as a “hub”, but instead looks at three groups and their varied definitions of parental engagement, because the programs stems much further than one group, but too many different agencies and stakeholders, such as Department of Labor, Department of Education, non-profit groups, legislators and others. Combining the necessary trust outlined by Johnson and its relevance to parental engagement success opportunities, there is a possible prescription for parental engagement. The current research in parental engagement suggests that a trusting relationship, often fostered by an already present group, creates the likelihood for parents to feel as if they are leaders and contributors to

the overall success of both society and their own family. Therefore, my research will help further our understanding of parental engagement moving past how service providers interact with parents, or how educational systems interact with parents, but into a much more holistic approach that connects parent voice to both policymakers and professionals.

### **Methodology:**

In order to answer the two major components of my research question in defining parental engagement and why it is important to the three groups of policymakers, professionals and parents, I conducted a set of in-depth interviews. My interview-based research was approved by the Trinity College Institutional Review Board. Participants in my interviews could choose to be publicly named or to remain anonymous, but all of them decided to use their real names. The research I conducted was in partnership with the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, a philanthropic group involved in the 2gen initiative. After directly working with Richard Sussman, Ph. D, Director of Early Childhood Investments at the Hartford Foundation, I was able to establish the three major groups of policymakers, professionals and parents. Policymakers are people who served of the inter-agency working group that had legislators, philanthropists, commissioners, and agency heads. Professionals are ground level service providers that work within the community such as educators, workforce training groups, nonprofits and city departments. Lastly, parents were intended to be those that had participated in any part of 2gen and were part of an “engaged” group. Below is the defined groups and

list of 12 interviews I was able to conduct. All publically items are cited, except for interview transcripts for this study that are in the author's possession.

### **Policymakers:**

- [State Senator Marilyn Moore, Co-Chair of Interagency Working Group](#)
- [State Representative Jeff Currey, Co-Chair of Interagency Working Group](#)
- [Linda Franciscovich, Executive Director of The Grossman Family Foundation](#)
- [Richard Porth, Director of the United Way Connecticut](#)
- [Steve Hernandez, Director for Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors](#)
- [Joan Barere, Policy Director for Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors](#)

### **Professional Staff:**

- [Sarah Dudzic, Director of MoveUp!](#)
- [Nathan Quesnel, Superintendent for East Hartford Public Schools](#)
- [Veronica Marion, East Hartford Public Schools Family and Community Partnerships](#)

#### Coordinator

- [Jessica Sager, Co-Founder and Executive Director of All Our Kin](#)
- [Kim Oliver, Director of Department of Family Youth Children and Recreation,](#)

#### Hartford

### **Parents**

- Janine McMahon, Parent Ambassador, Catholic Charities

At the conclusion of my research, I interviewed 6 policymakers, 5 professionals and 1 parent. I was able to compile over 70 pages of interview transcripts and piece together clear themes surrounding parental engagement definitions and their importance. A clear limitation to the analysis was my inability to interview more than one parent. One explanation for lack of parent interviews was the parents I intended to interview were low-income parents that were involved in 2gen. This would mean that parents are already probably working hourly waged jobs while juggling childcare and dedicating their leftover time to meetings and responsibilities involved with this new 2gen initiative. Therefore, it was extremely challenging for me to access parents to interview, because of their limited and valuable time that they were already spreading very thin among other important commitments. However, the one parent I did interview offered insightful context to compare with the larger sample I received from policymakers and professionals. It would be interesting for further research to hear from more parents involved in 2gen, but also from parents who were not involved in 2gen. Another interesting area of research would be to look at parents that started in 2gen, but left for some reason and were not retained within the program. This could shed important light on parent definitions of parental engagement and how policymakers and professionals possibly failed to meet the expectations.

All three groups were asked the same set of questions, which can be found in Appendix A. The questions first attempted to define parental engagement broadly, and then use a chart to focus on key aspects of 2gen and the level of opportunity for parents

to engage. This calculated division of questioning was an attempt to not limit respondents answers to generic definitions often found in policy or reports, but for a more genuine and meaningful definition that could possibly paint a more detailed description of parental engagement and its importance.

### **A Seat at the Table:**

Both the policymaker, professionals, and parents all agreed and understand that parental engagement success is through parent voice and not just the number of parents at a meeting. Policymakers and professionals both acknowledged that low-income parents' time is extremely valuable and that parent voice must be utilized if parents were going to make the dedicated effort to attend 2gen meetings. Richard Porth of CT United Way stated that parents need to have a "feeling they are being listened to," so that they know their time is being well spent. With competing demands of childcare, multiple jobs, and challenging transportation, if a parent shows up to a 2gen meeting and is not deliberately called on and incorporated into the work, they will not return. One policymaker even defined this concept as "voting with their feet". In other words, if a program fails to engage parents in the way they are promised, then those parents are first, not going to suggest the program to other parents, and secondly, not going to come back. This understanding is embedded in 2gen and is an attempt to move past looking at parental engagement as the number of parents at a given meeting.

Many interview participants described “classic PTO example” as an improper gauge for parental engagement, because numbers alone do not determine if a parent is involved. So by moving past counting the number of parents at a meeting, 2gen accomplishes the new mindset of parental engagement that is driven by parent voice and not parent numbers. One philanthropist, Linda Franciscovich, compared the numbers game to “checking a box.” Franciscovich argues, like others, that parental engagement is not just making sure that a parent is at the meeting, but that parent has a strong voice at the meeting.

One key element to parental engagement in the context of 2gen is breaking down barriers for parents. Parental engagement is a “two-way street” as described by Veronica Marion, Coordinator of East Hartford Public Schools Family and Public Partnerships. Marion defines parental engagement in new terms that 2gen is especially aware of. Parents are no longer sat down and told what they need, or how to do things, but hopefully in all aspects of a 2gen program are asked, “what do you need and how is it that we can work together?” Not only is this empowering, but also difficult, because moving beyond assumptions people have of low-income families and truly respecting and working with them as equals may present a challenge for some people. In some of the local sites, job applications are now even 2gen focused, to make sure anyone entering the program of the service provision side is thinking in a way that they are co-builders, and not providers that work over, but work within.

Policymakers admitted that not all professionals were at the point in which they were operating in a 2gen way, but accepted that it would be a long process that would



take time and commitment. Joan Barere, Policy Director for Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors, respected the struggle and growing pains that many large agencies have to go through in order to be able to engage parents at every level. For example, any large government department with thousand of employees struggle to operate effectively, especially with financial limitations in pressing budget times. So for innovative policy like 2gen, to ask for parents to now have a voice in every step of the process can be extremely challenging and it certainly will not happen overnight. This is also true for teachers, childcare providers and other professionals working with children and families. If parental engagement becomes a focus, a teacher with 25 children now may be struggling to manage 25 parents in a classroom. Or a family childcare provider, who is working extended hours with limited staff resources, now is expected to have professional development to better engage parents through a 2gen system. These steps do not happen overnight just because you call something 2gen or parental engagement in an already overworked and stretched staffing environment, meaning it takes time and effort to change and adapt to a 2gen model. Policymakers and professionals agreed that this takes leadership from the top down. Nate Quesnel, Superintendent of East Hartford Public Schools, said

We have to prioritize this (parental engagement) as leaders, we have to talk about this, we have to make this part of our strategic plans, we have to make sure that funding and resources, just talking about something and not putting anything behind it is just a lot of words.

This transition is important and needs to happen from the top down. While parental engagement is happening in classrooms or with certain legislators having town

hall meetings, policymakers and professionals believe it needs to become a prioritized investment that people adopt for it to be successful.

Policymakers, professionals and parents all emphasized the large impact that parent storytelling had within shaping 2gen. Parental engagement was defined within the context of storytelling. Many legislators and staff professionals addressed that those in power often assumed they knew what was best for the people that they were serving. In many instances, parents could directly speak to the barriers that were preventing them from obtaining services. Before 2gen, a policymaker or professional often might have assumed that because a service is available, then for a parent or family to not obtain the services is because of disinterest from citizens. 2gen calls directly upon parent voice so that stories like the following could be heard by professionals. Sarah Dudzic, Director of MoveUp!, adult education, said,

We had a father...say I went to an agency and the guy goes “well if you were a woman with two kids we could help, but you are a man so we can't.” Because there are parameters for mothers but not fathers in that program

For Dudzic and other professionals, it is challenging to move away from the mentality of “we know best.” The superintendent of East Hartford Public Schools, Nate Quesnel, openly acknowledged that transition from service providers knowing best, to collectively as a team of both parents and professionals knowing best. This is an important transition that is occurring within 2gen. Parents have often felt like Karen Mapp addressed that their is and “us against them” mentality between parents and

providers (Mapp, 2009). 2gen is attempting to transition that role so that parents now have a seat at the table.

It is important that parents are able to tell their stories, but both policymakers and professionals understand that this may not be easy for parents. Parents have operated within a model where their voice is often not heard or listened to. Therefore, it is the role of those who often hold the power to make a conscious effort to hear and respect the voices of parents. Policymakers and professionals alike are compassionate to the vulnerability of low-income parents because the stories they may be telling can come from a place of hurt and despair. With this consensus, policymakers must be sensitive to the vulnerability and bravery that parents have when sharing stories. For Joan Barere, Policy Director for Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors, the reaction to parental engagement was clear: “You can tell by the body language by the people around the table that the parent is respected as a voice.”

Janine McMahon, a parent involved in 2gen, could feel that her voice was respected and listened to. McMahon also acknowledged while some parents want to just yell, she knew that even if everything parents had to say was not directly implemented, it was always strongly considered and respected within the contribution to a meeting. This is important for McMahon to address, because after being listened to as an equal partner, she knew while her opinions may not always be reflected, she knew she was being heard and worked with. For this level of respect to be given, it is an important message to parents: parental engagement is an important aspect to 2gen, and it is not taken lightly. McMahon went as far to say that “no parent was ever turned

away”. For some professionals, while the key role for parents was storytelling and advocating the issues that most affect their children and families, many identified key components of leadership within the definition of parental engagement.

### **Parents as Leaders:**

Although all groups agreed parents had the potential to be leaders, policymakers had high aspirations for parents as leaders while professionals believed there were limitations for parents as leaders within 2gen. Transitioning out of a “business as usual” model can be extremely difficult to shift to parents having both voice and leadership in a way they have never before. Many policymakers addressed the dilemma that for many agencies, parental engagement is very new. For some agencies or groups, it has been challenging enough to even have parents be heard and have a voice. Others think that it needs to be more than just a voice, but parents should be fully functioning within leadership positions. State Senator Marilyn Moore of Bridgeport coined the phrase, “Leadership from Within.” In other words, Moore means that because parents are going to benefit the most from the services, parents should be driving the conversation and decision making from within.

Some structures, like within East Hartford Public Schools, already have leadership roles for parents. Nate Quesnel credited parents for having a leadership role in the creation of the strategic plan. This was a shift for East Hartford Public Schools, but they acknowledge parents as leaders and respected their voice to a high degree. Many professionals and legislators believed stipends were a good way for

compensating parents for their time and effort, but State Senator Marilyn Moore thought otherwise:

Why do they have to be the person giving them the stipend on the side. Because you don't value what they bring to the table and you are not willing to step aside and let people be able to do what they need for themselves to sustain a program because the system of poverty is just going to perpetuate itself over and over and over again.

Senator Moore highlights a discrepancy among service providers and policymakers. Many service providers think at a certain point, it is their job to take parent voice and give it credence. While policymakers like Senator Moore adopted a no excuses approach, many professionals were not discrediting parents, but instead felt like their professional training and background had the best potential to move parents' voices forward. Professionals wanted to take the stories and experiences from parents, and give this meaning by implementing new strategies in a 2gen model. This disagreement among policymakers and professionals is not of ill will. Policymakers, like Senator Moore, are hopeful in the extent to which parents can be fully engaged while professionals felt the pressures both of their jobs and of parents to carry the weight of the services. Professionals have to balance the aspirations for parental engagement Senator Moore has, but also with understanding that for many people, parental engagement was a new concept with major restrictions surrounding time and resources. So while some may be eager to employ parents within 2gen, it is evident that some policymakers and professionals believe that stipends are the best starting point to compensate parents for their time and engagement.

When many policymakers and professionals were pressed, it was challenging to state exactly which parents could fully engage. Many struggled with the concept that this 2gen model had limitations, but they were hopeful that training programs like Parent Leadership Training Institute could help teach and prepare parents to be engaged. The difficulty with parental engagement in a 2gen model is that the parents being engaged are low-income and often have no college or sometimes even a high school degree. Therefore, these parents may not have the level of efficacy required to engage in the ways that 2gen calls for. This analysis is reflective of professionals' concerns that parents need a layer of support to engage within a system they have little experience every being a part of. Barere notes, "if you have parents who have had that training, they know how to go and see their legislator." Through the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), parents learn how the political system works through an extensive 20 week program on how different aspects of government systems work. The issue here is that this only addresses a small group of parents lucky enough to have had the training. Does this mean that parents who do not get the same training go into attempts of parental engagement opportunities unprepared? This confusion surrounding which parent can fully engage reveals that moving past rhetoric to fully involving participants who may not have the "prerequisites" can still become a part of the 2gen process as a co-builder. While the level to which parents—especially low-income minority parents—should be engaged, policy makers, professionals and parents believed PLTI and a new Parent Academy had the possibility to break down barriers and move parents past just a storyteller role.

## **Parents Need Training:**

One of the major issues around involving parents in a decision making process is their lack of experience. Policymakers, professionals, and parents all acknowledged that for many low-income parents, involvement has never been a regular practice.

Therefore, to assume that parents could jump into a fast-paced, confusing legislative and programmatic planning process is ignorant. Even Janine McMahon acknowledged a steep learning curve surrounding parental engagement and the expectations for her as a parent in meetings. So while policymakers, professionals and parents all describe parental engagement as parents as storytellers, leaders and partners, it was often with the caveat of all of those elements when parents were “ready” and had been “trained”. These keywords opened the discussion in many interviews to the limitations of trying to be extremely innovative in programming while also being innovative in the stakeholders sitting at the table. Policymakers and professionals both agreed that for many low-income parents, before rich and meaningful parental engagement could occur, a certain degree of training needed to take place.

Similar to both CEPE and LSNA described in the literature review, Connecticut has a Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) and a Parent Academy that fosters some of the necessary skills to be fully engaged. Representative Jeff Currey described programs like these as the first step to successful parental engagement. By having a precursor, parents are establishing themselves within a system that they may have never fully understood. PLTI is a program separate from 2gen that provides a clear mission to help a normally unheard group of parents learn how to become advocates.

PLTI is a program that consists of weekly meetings for several months. This leads to an interesting question: for low-income parents to be engaged, does it take months of training and practice? With 80,000 low income families in Hartford alone, providing months of training for successful and meaningful engagement to even a fraction of that group would be time consuming and costly. However, this is just one possibility for parental engagement. Parent Academy, a somewhat condensed and 2gen-focused version of parental engagement, has been created in the hope to prepare parents for the complicated government and social service system. Janine McMahon spoke with excitement and pride, when describing how the Parent Academy was created,

We, a group of parents within the 2gen have come up with this Parent Academy and we were actually given the opportunity to give a presentation to all the partners at the table and some of the Senators and state legislators and since then we actually we got a grant...to help the families to understand what is available, what they can do for themselves. It is more like an empowerment and self-sufficient thing...I think it will help more parents to understand the services available to them.

Ms. McMahon was able to describe exactly what meaningful parental engagement offered to an entire community. While Ms. McMahon was already a volunteer at Catholic Charities and learned to navigate the system, she along with other parents understood the need for parents to have an accessible parent training program. McMahon proudly described her advocacy for creating a program like the Parent Academy that she knew and believed would help parents become better advocates for themselves. While a Parent Academy could be presumptive in assuming parents



needed extra help to learn, McMahon viewed this as a way to even the playing field with policymakers and professionals. Like policymakers and professionals have received different degrees of training, parents could also benefit from certain training before being expected to fully contribute to a dialogue dominated by an “elite” group of individuals. The Parent Academy that McMahon and other parents helped to advocate for plays an important role in showing that even parents feel intimidated by the system and feel as if they could benefit from a certain level of training. If the Parent Academy can successfully work with parents as partners like McMahon imagines, it can be a useful tool like CEPE or LSNA to foster rich parental engagement. This will break down some of the early onset problems of having parents at meetings, but not knowing why they are there or how to utilize their experiences.

New training programs like Parent Academy all circulate around what Steve Hernandez, Director for Commission on Women, Children, and Seniors, identified as letting parents know what they are missing. Once parents know that decisions are being made without them, they can demand a seat at the table and Parent Academy allows for this to happen. Because once parents are aware of when meetings are and who is there making decisions, then parents will have the ability to become a part of the conversation. One major implication of this, however, is policymakers and professionals both agree that they must be ready and prepared to listen. Parents, like McMahon, expect to be listened to and respected, especially if they are devoting their time and energy to make it to these meetings. Policymakers and professionals agreed on the heavy burden it takes for long-time public servants to hear that what they are doing is

not what is best for families. Therefore, if we are going to make an investment in Parent Academy and parental engagement, then we also must make an investment in preparing the privileged individuals who are used to operating under a business as usual mindset to put parents first, which may mean they are going to be told they are wrong at times.

### **Parents at a Local Level:**

Policymaker and professionals had conflicting views on where parental engagement can be most successful. While some defined parental engagement at all levels of government, some believed that there are limitations and barriers for some types of parental engagement. Most Policymakers look for parent voice at the Capitol when deciding on policies and programs. But many professionals determined that while it may be easier for parents in Hartford to get to the Capitol, others in Bridgeport or New Haven will have a much harder job getting there. To remedy this, both policymakers and professionals view local parental engagement as some of the most successful parental engagement. Local engagement can bring parents together and to hear the voices and then to send a representative to some of the larger state-level meetings. While this sounds like a state representative that could be listening to parent voice, it also comes from parent leaders who may have the ability to attend state level events. Although this is a limitation to parental engagement, local leaders such as Veronica Marion of East Hartford Public Schools sees this as a way to build community and strength within groups that may not always have been connected. Kim Oliver, Director of Department of

Family Youth Children and Recreation in Hartford, believes bringing opportunities directly to parents is seen as one of the best modes to engaging parents,

*“it is taking advantages of our libraries or recreational centers or other facilities like our schools and our churches, but also again how do we bring it home to them and make it relevant to everyday living.”*

Oliver addresses the already established systems in place that can be effective hubs for parental engagement. This builds on past research in understanding that rewriting an entire system is unnecessary when there are already places and programs in place that can help facilitate parental engagement. To ask a majority of low-income parents to make it to the Capitol is a tremendous request, but providing comfortable and local locations creates a better chance for long-term parental engagement. It is ambitious to attempt parental engagement at a state level when engagement has not even been present at many local levels. So while some policymakers want to have parents directly contributing into the legislative system at the Capitol on a regular basis, this may not be the best use of a low-income parents time. Therefore, professionals embraced the role of hearing parent voice and also having leaders champion that voice at the state Capitol when necessary. Finding the proper balance between local and state level parental engagement is important, but when working with individuals whose time is already greatly consumed by work, children and other demands, it is important to consider where voice will be most effective.

### **Descriptive Representation:**

Decision-making for government social programs is often made by a core group of predominantly white professionals. Many of these policymakers and professionals have dedicated their lives as public servants in the hope of helping the community and the citizens that benefit from childcare, job training and social service programs. However, policymakers and professionals both agree that services are frequently provided only under the assumption that they are what is best for their “constituents” or “clients”. Senator Moore was critical calling some non profit’s “poverty pimps” serving generations of the same family with no change in outcome. In other words, service providers have worked with grandmothers as children, mothers as children, then now to the children themselves. Cycles of family members have all been trapped in a cycle of poverty, but limited evaluation has been given as to why the “business as usual” services are not working.

2gen offers an alternative to the cycle of poverty by listening to voices of those that will end up receiving the services. Both policymakers and professionals identified incorporating a diverse set of voices that are directly impacted as being crucial to understanding exactly what works and what does not work. Dudzic of MoveUp!, said,

*“It’s a lot of middle class white folks that are paid to go to these meetings determining what is going to happen out there for people that are people of color and low income areas. So really hearing that first hand experience of what it is like and trying to understand that really is important in the development and design of a program.”*

Dudzic, as well as both other policymaker and professionals, know that white middle class voices determining services for a predominantly low-income minority population makes limited sense. This mode of service provisions is extremely

ineffective, and for clear reasons. The group impacted by poverty, transportation issues and limited access to resources understands the first-hand struggles with overcoming these barriers. This groups can very simply identify these barriers. Engaging parents is important because it takes away the assumption that many outsiders have as to why things are not working, and going directly to the source.

Not only is it important to hear first hand, but it is also a smart investment. For policymakers especially, the investment made is crucial. In tight state budgets, creating programs that are streamlining services and guaranteeing the best results is vital. Both Steve Hernandez and Barere of the Commission of Women, Children, and Elderly spoke to the importance,

*“the expense of creating a system for parents that is not informed by parents is much more than any expense you can have in creating a system that is informed by parents. Because you are potentially creating a system that does not respond to the very people you are servicing. That is a waste of money.”*

While involving parents is just good policy, and for many, the morally right thing to do, it is also a smart investment. Barere went as far as to compare 2gen to the private industry. Barere equated not listening to parents’ voices to private companies not having focus groups for a new product to determine what people liked and did not like. By viewing parents as “clients”, it creates a new type of atmosphere that makes hearing and listening to parent voice a smart investment. 2gen helps accomplish this because, while parent voice is always important, many legislators like Senator Moore have consistently harped on agencies and professionals to make sure that parents are at the table all times.

## **Parents as Family Leaders:**

Lastly, while much of the parental engagement circulates around policy and decision making, policy makers, professionals and parents all believe in the success of children being directly related to the success of a parent. Nate Quesnel, Superintendent of East Hartford, says, “You know it's no secret when you see a successful kid; usually there is an involved parent behind that kid”. While this may not be new information, the implications within a 2gen parental engagement model are innovative and important. Parents, especially low-income minority parents, have often had very low expectations as stakeholders (Mapp & Hong, 2009). Policymakers, professionals and parents tended to agree that parental engagement—especially within a 2gen initiative—breaks down past assumptions and creates a culture that “parents know best”. Policymakers and professionals respected that parents knew the barriers in life best, whether it was transportation, childcare, job training or any other daily obstacles. Parents know their barriers, and if given an opportunity or a voice at the table, then great things can happen both for the child and parent. For Jessica Seager, Co-Founder and Executive Director at All our Kin, “As an organization especially dedicated to children, we know to really maximize gains for kids, it is not enough to run a high quality childhood program, you have to think about how you are supporting the whole family”. Parental engagement must take what Seager identifies as “supporting the whole family” into full consideration and planning. As parents work through 2gen and Parent Academy, it is important to realize fostering parent voice and learning about systems can be an extremely empowering experience. A parent with a toolbox full of skills to navigate school systems

or other social service programs can now be an advocate for their child, family and themselves. In essence, this accomplishes what parental engagement intends to become: a holistic approach to breaking cycles of poverty and lifting an entire family from poverty. Although it is important to note that 2gen and Parent Academy are serving very small groups, if replicated appropriately, an excluded group of low-income, predominantly minority individuals can be awakened within a system by benefiting from both the policy and programs created.

### **Aligning Definitions of Success:**

Throughout my research, many terms were used to define the role of parental engagement. Policymakers, professionals and parents all used the word “partner” when defining parental engagement. Partnership in this context was then elaborated to “give parents a seat at the table” so that parents were “respected and valued”. These words create the structure to which any successful parental engagement model must operate in. Moving forward in the 2gen model and in any other future program that attempts to have “parental engagement”, it is essential that a clear definition and expectation is set. Some policymakers expected parents to be leaders and end up with employment in the program. Other policymakers believed that parents would need extensive training in order to become engaged. Professionals struggled with balancing parents as partners while also taking control within a program to provide services based on parent voice built by professional experience. And for parents, they want to know that if they are

dedicating their time and effort to make it to a meeting, that parent voice and input is being respected and taken into consideration.

Parental engagement can no longer be rhetoric or bragging rights for any policymaker and professional, but needs to become concrete reality. Most policymakers, professionals and parents all have a general understanding of what parental engagement means within a 2gen context. For a superintendent versus a policymaker or any other position, each role has a unique job of engaging parents, and this is precisely what makes having one clear definition very challenging. However, all three groups can agree that, when parents are involved in decision making, programs and policies reflect the needs of the parents, children and families as a whole.

Serving families in a holistic approach is a major undertaking and shift in the way government and service providers do business, and incorporating parents as leaders within this model is an added element. When entering into any new program that calls for parental engagement, all stakeholders should have clear expectations for their role in parental engagement. Some programs can call for parent leadership and others for parents as storytellers. However, clear expectations from policymakers, professionals and parents on the role of parental engagement and how it will be supported by different stakeholders is important to determine success. While it may be difficult, parental engagement for policymakers, professionals and parents is the only chance that this new and innovative system has any chance of being successful in the first place. So, while asking agencies and groups to make major shifts in the way they operate, it is backed with the first-hand accounts of parents and families that will drive these groups



to work more efficiently and effectively. Parental engagement must move past the jargon-like term and move into a meaningful measure of success for any program. Anyone can claim parents are involved or engaged by having a parent at the meeting, but it requires moving past the rhetoric and moving into the reality that parents have valid contributions that should be respected. Going forward, if parental engagement can be defined by policymakers, professionals, and parents with clear expectations set regarding level of input or expectation of training for parents prior to engagement, then 2gen and other programs can begin to operate in a truly holistic model that places parents at the center.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Script:**

***Thanks for participating in this interview surrounding 2gen and parental engagement . This is a completely voluntary interview and you can stop at anytime. I want to ask if you would like to be named or anonymous. Being named will make all your responses publicly available. If you choose to be anonymous, I will remove all identifiable information. (If respondent choose named have them fill out form). May I start recording?***

***I have selected Connecticut's 2gen initiative as my focus area. My questions relate to your understanding and sense about the value and impact of parental engagement in this new work. Let's start more generally.***

1: When you think about parental engagement , what comes to your mind?

***(Possible Prompts:*** How do you see parents being involved? What are the characteristics of this type of involvement? What types of experiences have you had?)

2: Can you explain specific ways parents can be engaged in public social programs?

3: Does parental engagement matter to you? Why?

4: What do you see as the opportunities and challenges in making real parental engagement happen?

5: What kinds of barriers currently prevent rich parental engagement from happening?  
(Possible Prompt: Individuals or Institutions?)

**Connecticut's 2gen is an important place to research parental engagement . The legislation is specifically written calling for parental engagement . Next I am going to show you this chart where parental engagement may occur throughout 2gen and you can discuss both if it is currently happening and if it should be happening?**

<b>Stage of 2gen</b>	<b>Is there a place for parental engagement in this step?</b>	<b>In this 2gen project, what is the role of parental engagement in this step?</b>
<b>Research</b> (Investigating reports and collecting information)		
<b>Creating Law</b> (Meeting with legislators, creating bill, providing public testimony, lobbying legislators for passage of bill)		
<b>Designing Local Programs</b> (In light of law, designing actual mechanics of project)		
<b>Advising Local Programs</b> (Active guidance of the needs of parent and families for continuation of services)		
<b>Employment in Local Programs</b> (Paid positions for parents)		

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Evaluating Success/Failure of Programs</b> (Assessing project outcomes)</p>		
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***My final questions want to touch on your previous answers and thoughts from the chart.***

6: Do you think that parental engagement in the 2gen design and implementation strategy is different from your past experiences? Did it make a difference and how do you know?

7: Some people argue that parental engagement can be time consuming, costly, or too challenging. Do you agree or disagree with those opinions, and why?

8: Lastly how do we do achieve greater parental engagement in light of the challenges?