



Systems that Serve: Parents and Communities at the Center

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Introduction

Early childhood systems are a network of policies and programs that impact the well-being of young children from birth to age five, and are often funded by different agencies and levels of government. This includes the design and delivery of child care and early learning programs, public benefit programs, health care, child welfare, and protective services. Without input from families and caregivers, early childhood systems risk being designed based on assumptions or outdated realities. The unique insights, perspectives, and daily realities that families with young children face can inform how a system becomes more responsive to community needs and change over time. In particular, family support services that are culturally responsive, accessible and relevant for the families they are intended to support are key.

"Community voice matters because when we talk about systems change, we're really talking about policy, practices, and resources. When we listen to the experiences people are having, we can understand what policies, resource shifts, or practices need to change."

**Executive Director, Poughkeepsie
Children's Cabinet**

Across early childhood systems, there is increasing recognition that engagement from families and caregivers is essential to ensuring policies, programs, and services are responsive, and strengthen trust and communication between families and providers¹.

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) Parent Cabinet was launched in late 2021 to strengthen how the state integrates family voice within its early childhood system. Consistent engagement also helps families identify gaps, barriers, or unintended consequences that bureaucratic administrators may overlook, and advocate for changes that improve outcomes for families across the state. The Connecticut OEC Parent Cabinet was designed to elevate parents and caregivers as partners in shaping policies and practices to become more responsive to families' lived experiences and needs.

Now in its fourth year, the Parent Cabinet exists within a Connecticut state landscape that continues to evolve. For example, through an initiative known as Early Start CT² state-funded programs are being consolidated to simplify access and increase utilization. Beginning in 2027, a competitive contracting effort will aim to align resources with the demand for services more effectively. Additionally, Connecticut passed legislation in 2025 to expand funding for high-quality child care through the Early Childhood Education Endowment, which aims to, among other objectives, help more families access child care, support higher wages for educators, and improve child care facilities³.



As policies and programs change, what it looks like to sustain opportunities for family engagement will also need to evolve. Given the state's commitment to improving equitable access to early childhood services, this case study seeks to understand how the Parent Cabinet has emerged as a key space to institutionalize the partnership between policymakers and OEC staff on one hand and the families most impacted by the OEC's state-level policies on the other—and to translate this partnership into meaningful and sustainable systems change.

Commissioned by Third Sector, this case study evaluation was conducted by Anavi Strategies to understand better how positioning parents and caregivers as co-designers can lay the groundwork needed to transform early childhood systems over time.

The ultimate goal of any Third Sector project is to support systems change through an outcomes-focused approach. Most importantly, this means ensuring that public systems and programs are aligned to the needs of every community that is most impacted by a specific issue. When we can observe concrete changes to policies, programs, and resource allocations in a way that is directly responsive to the voices of historically underserved communities and of those most impacted by these policies and resources, we can begin to account for systems change impact.

Methodology

Anavi Strategies conducted this case study evaluation between June and September 2025 using participatory evaluation methods to embody the core values of equity, inclusion, accountability, and shared learning. Given the complex nature of systems change work, the case study relies heavily on qualitative stakeholder feedback to assess and understand systems change impacts.

This case study builds on prior assessments of the Cabinet's design and early implementation and aims to surface what has shifted since the Cabinet's launch, what supports or conditions made those shifts possible, and what lessons might inform future practice.

Our goal was to understand not only what has changed, but how those changes have been made possible, and whether they signal deeper readiness for sustained systems transformation. The Water of Systems Change framework⁴, described below, supports this case study by providing a structured way to examine not only what has changed but also how change takes root at multiple levels.

These findings aim to help the OEC, the Parent Cabinet, and other government leaders reflect on the early wins and the challenges of the model. The goal is to strengthen approaches that make family

engagement in public systems more accessible and equitable. Beyond this project, the lessons may guide the wider early childhood field in shaping authentic partnerships between families and government, including those through similar cabinet or council models.

The Water of Systems Change Framework

We base this case study on The Water of Systems Change framework⁵. FSG asserts that durable change rarely starts with prominent structural shifts at the policy level. Instead, it grows first through shifts in relationships, shared assumptions, and power dynamics that influence formal rules and structures over time. This perspective matters because it helps us see family engagement as more than a programmatic shift. Consistent integration of parent voices is a deeper cultural and relational shift inside public systems.

This framework (Figure 1)⁶ identifies six interconnected conditions ranging from policies and resource flows to relationships and mental models that often keep complex social problems in place. FSG suggests that even when a few of these conditions start to shift, systems can move in more equitable directions.

Contribution vs Attribution

It should be noted that true social change cannot happen in a silo or through the efforts of one organization or even one initiative alone. As one actor in complex systems, Third Sector cannot reasonably prove or claim attribution for most systems- and community-level impacts described in this report. Recognizing this, the current case study does not attempt to establish causation or attribution. Instead, it focuses on exploring how Third Sector and the client projects supported by Third Sector may have contributed to wider change and impact. This represents a unique and emerging approach to nonprofit impact case study evaluations that acknowledges the true nature of systems transformation and systems change work.

Six Conditions of Systems Change

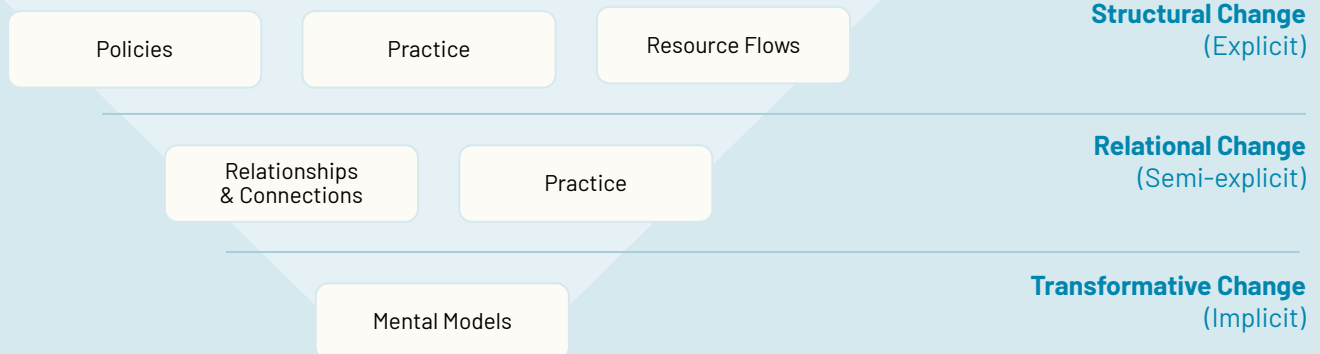


Figure 1: 6 Conditions of Systems Change
Adapted from FSG's Water of Systems Framework

To understand systems change impacts, the case study looks for signs of change at each of these three levels, recognizing how OEC's work with Third Sector helped inform and advance the Parent Cabinet's structures, practices, and approaches to sustainability.

Anavi Strategies applied a thematic coding process shaped by FSG's Water of Systems Change framework⁷. We used the framework to organize data and highlight three kinds of evidence: early signs of progress, partial or uneven shifts, and persistent barriers that keep systems from moving forward. Looking at the material this way helped us trace not only what changed, but also what remains stuck.

Through this lens, the evaluation aims to help OEC, the Parent Cabinet, and peer government leaders better understand how family engagement influences governance, policy, and day-to-day service delivery.

These findings can potentially impact the broader field by helping inform city, county, state, and other public and community leaders interested in designing their own participatory governance structures via a parent or children's cabinet (or other similar bodies).



Data Collection Activities

Document and Material Review

Our team reviewed a wide range of materials to ground the analysis. This included prior evaluations, governance memos, and the Standard Operating Procedures developed for the Parent Cabinet Subcommittee and External Advisory Committees. We also examined publicly available sources, including state legislation, Cabinet meeting notes, OEC's strategic planning documents, early learning impact reports, and OEC's Parent Cabinet co-creation toolkit. Taken together, these records showed how the Cabinet's role evolved over time and provided early insights into where systems change may be starting to form.

OEC Division Team Facilitation Summaries

Anavi Strategies provided question prompts that were used for focus group discussions with six OEC division teams between April 2025 through June 2025. The focus groups brought together OEC leaders and staff across divisions, including both those who had already partnered with the Parent Cabinet and those offering feedback as potential partners for future collaboration. Participants included division directors (Birth to Three, Early Care and Education, Quality Improvement, Family Support, and Child Care and Development Fund), program managers, and agency leadership such as Commissioner Elena Trueworthy and Parent Cabinet lead Chenae Russell.

This mix of perspectives ensured the discussions included direct experience from parents serving on the Cabinet as well as the opportunity to identify where deeper integration could occur in the future.

Engagement looked different across divisions. Birth to Three, Quality Improvement, and Family Support had already worked directly with Parent Cabinet members. Other divisions, including Early Care and Education and parts of CCDF, were still testing out how parents could become part of their initiatives. By including both kinds of groups in the focus groups, OEC was able to recognize current successes while also surfacing opportunities for future collaboration.

To maintain trust and protect the existing relationships between division staff and facilitators, our team did not sit in on these sessions. Instead, we analyzed transcripts and detailed notes to understand better how staff experience and describe the Cabinet's role, value, and influence within the agency.





Interview Transcripts

Anavi Strategies analyzed 13 interview transcripts from exit interviews conducted in 2024 with Parent Cabinet members, many of whom also served on the committee in charge of selecting the most recent cohort of incoming Cabinet members. These interviews offered deep insight into the lived experience of participating in the Cabinet and reflections on what had changed during their tenure. In addition, we reviewed transcripts from two OEC staff interviews and conducted two story-driven interviews with current Parent Cabinet members. The primary purpose of story-driven interviews, or narrative inquiry, is to understand life experiences through detailed stories and personal narrative⁸.



Understanding the State Context

Connecticut is located in the northeastern United States and is home to approximately 3.6 million residents, making it the 29th most populous state in the country⁹. The state spans 5,543 square miles and includes a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Children under 18 make up 19.7 percent of the population, and the median age of residents is 41.2 years, 5% higher than the national median of 39.1.¹⁰ Roughly two-thirds of residents identify as White (67 percent), while 17.8 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino, 12.6 percent identify as Black or African American, and 5.3 percent identify as Asian. This reflects the increasing racial and ethnic diversity among children and families¹¹. About 22 percent of children in Connecticut live in households where a language other than English is spoken¹². These demographics demonstrate the need for multilingual services and culturally responsive public systems.

Economically, Connecticut has a mixed picture. Connecticut's median household income is \$88,429, compared to the national median of \$80,610¹³, yet 12 percent of children under five years old live in poverty, highlighting economic disparities¹⁴. Access to early childhood education varies across the state. While Connecticut has invested in preschool expansion, only 58 percent of three- and four-year-olds are enrolled in preschool programs¹⁵. Additionally, the cost of center-based infant care averages \$15,501 annually, accounting for nearly 18 percent of the median household income¹⁶. The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with high housing and child care costs, continue to strain many families, particularly those with young children in low-income or historically marginalized communities.



Literature Review: Parent Engagement and Equitable Policymaking in Early Childhood

A growing body of research elevates the significant role of parents and families in advancing more equitable outcomes in early childhood systems. When parents, especially those from historically marginalized communities, have meaningful opportunities to provide their input, early childhood policies become more responsive to families' lived experiences and needs.

Meta-analyses by Henderson and Mapp (2002)¹⁷ and Jeynes (2007)¹⁸ established that strong family-school-community connections are consistently linked to improved learning outcomes for children, with the greatest gains seen among families with the least access to resources. In early childhood specifically, research has confirmed that family engagement strengthens kindergarten readiness, promotes cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and reduces disparities in school readiness and long-term achievement¹⁹.

While some of the literature focuses on parents' direct involvement in their child's learning environment, evidence also shows that when parents are engaged in decisionmaking about education systems and policies,

similar benefits can be realized in both student outcomes and in how those systems can shift to be more responsive to families' daily experiences^{20,21,22,23,24}.

For example, in 2024, a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) initiative in Forsyth County, North Carolina, trained Black and Latino parents as co-researchers. The parents identified cultural and access barriers in local Pre-K programs. Their findings informed new "Pre-K Parent Quality Standards" adopted through the county's ARPA-funded early learning expansion. This example shows how co-designed solutions can embed family voice into governance structures and advance equity²⁵.

Participatory governance models like Head Start Policy Councils²⁶ also illustrate how family leadership can shape equitable policies in early learning. Research shows that when parents help set priorities and oversee program implementation, services are more culturally relevant and better aligned with the needs of families facing systemic barriers²⁷. The National Center for Families Learning (2023) further highlighted promising practices from across the country where parent advisory groups co-designed policies that address racial disparities in early education access and quality²⁸.

The literature consistently emphasizes that how families are engaged is also pivotal. Wallerstein and Duran's (2010) Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) work, echoed by Sandstrom et al. (2020), shows that tokenistic or superficial engagement does little to shift power or advance equity^{29,30}. Effective approaches center families as leaders and partners in governance, build community capacity for shared decisionmaking, and create structures that amplify the voices of those who have historically been left out of policy spaces.

While more large-scale longitudinal studies could help quantify the direct relationship between parental involvement and policy equity in early childhood, the current evidence base strongly suggests that systems are more likely to advance equitable outcomes when they invest in sustained family engagement efforts that effectively integrate families' lived experiences in the design, implementation, and evaluation of early childhood education policies. These approaches not only strengthen children's developmental trajectories but also help dismantle structural barriers by ensuring families most impacted by inequities have real opportunities in shaping the policies that affect them.

Structural Barriers, Parental Engagement, and Equity in Early Childhood

Research further demonstrates that structural factors such as poverty, systemic racism, language barriers, and rigid governance structures intersect to limit parental engagement and, in turn, contribute to

less equitable policy outcomes in early childhood systems. Families who have been historically marginalized often face multiple, overlapping barriers that make it more difficult to participate in decisionmaking processes that directly impact their children's well-being.

For example, parents working low-wage or hourly jobs may lack paid leave, reliable transportation, or child care to attend meetings or serve on advisory councils³¹. Families who speak languages other than English or who come from cultural backgrounds underrepresented

in mainstream systems often find that their perspectives are not meaningfully reflected or valued in traditional governance structures³². Furthermore, longstanding experiences of discrimination and systemic bias create deep-seated mistrust, making it less likely that families feel safe or empowered to engage with institutions³³.

When families most impacted by inequities have little power to shape the systems that serve them, early childhood policies can inadvertently perpetuate disparities. Without family perspectives, programs may fail to address practical barriers to access, lack culturally or linguistically responsive practices, or uphold policies that disproportionately burden families of color.³⁴

In addition to inviting families to participate, efforts must be made, such as providing child care or stipends, to transform the conditions that limit their engagement. Dismantling structural barriers and creating pathways for shared decisionmaking are critical to ensuring that early childhood systems equitably address the diverse needs of all families.

The Opportunity

The Connecticut OEC Parent Cabinet provides a unique opportunity to explore how changes in relationships, power dynamics, and mental models can position families to influence agency practices and policy decisions in the long term. This case study documents how the Parent Cabinet's engagement with families is beginning to shape decisionmaking at the state level. It also surfaces practical lessons on centering parents as co-leaders and embedding the structures and practices within public agencies that make this possible.

By capturing these early indicators of progress, Connecticut and other states seeking to strengthen family engagement—particularly through similar cabinet or council models—can identify what it will take to strengthen, sustain, and scale this model so that efforts to engage parents meaningfully remain a core element of equity in early childhood governance.

Project History, Overview, and Goals

The Connecticut OEC Parent Cabinet was established to incorporate the perspectives of parents with lived experience into discussions focusing on early childhood policies, programs, services, and public communications. As defined by the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC), the Parent Cabinet is a diverse, parent-led advisory group that meets regularly to help improve the lives of children and families across the state.

Table 1: Inaugural Parent Cabinet Members (2021 - 2024)

Name	Region
Bianca Shinn-Desras	Region 1
Kaitlyn Heffernan	Region 1
Steven Cousin	Region 2
Symone Maguire	Region 2
Marinda Monfilston	Region 3
Nicole Broadus	Region 3
Ruth-Ann Bucknor	Region 3
Carla Abdo-Katsipis	Region 4
Caitlin McNamara	Region 4
Krysta Chambers	Region 4
Christina Augliera	Region 5
Joshua Vaughn	Region 5
Maria Del Pilar Vargas	Region 5
Casey Russo	Region 6
Ivoni Montes	Region 6

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

In 2019, OEC initiated a co-design process to develop the Cabinet. A group of 10 parent leaders, the Design Team, many of whom had been active in the state's Two-Generational Initiative³⁵ or had completed leadership programs like the Parent Leadership Training Institute³⁶, worked to outline the Cabinet's vision, mission, and structure. Between early 2020 and early 2021, the Design Team learned about national models for parent engagement, reflected on their own experiences, and developed a recruitment plan.

**CT Department of Children and Families
Regions & Area Offices: January 2020**

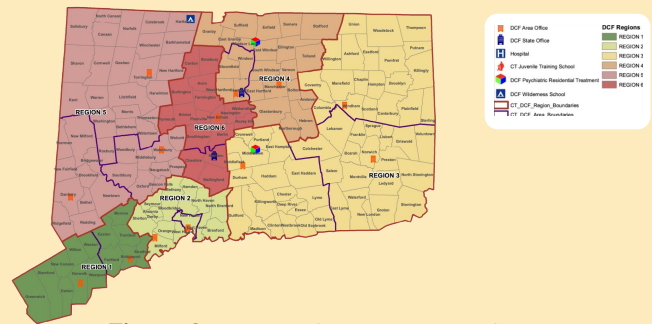


Figure 2: Connecticut Map of Regions

In 2021, OEC and the Design Team carried out a statewide recruitment process and received 68 applications. Fifteen individuals were selected and represented the six Department of Children and Families (DCF) regions. Membership criteria included geographic balance, engagement with OEC services, and diversity in race, ethnicity, language, parental roles, and family structures.

The inaugural cohort, launched in fall 2021, included parents of children from birth to age five, many of whom had experience with early childhood programs such as Care 4 Kids, Birth to Three, and Home Visiting, as well as public assistance programs like WIC and SNAP.

Since its launch, the Cabinet has worked to build connections across regions and with OEC staff. Its stated priorities include increasing opportunities for family input and aligning its activities with OEC's equity goals.

Table 2: Parent Cabinet Milestones

Year	Milestone
2019	OEC initiates a design process with 10 parent and community leaders to draft vision, mission, and structure.
2020–2021	Design Team developed bylaws, a recruitment plan, and studied national models.
2021	First Parent Cabinet cohort selected from 68 applicants; represents all six DCF regions.
2023	Public Act 23-160 passed and established the Cabinet as a statutory advisory body; Third Sector analyzed internal systems, outlined recommendations for an improved governance structure, and mapped feedback loops.
2024	Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for onboarding, draft Parent Cabinet bylaws completed, subcommittees strengthened, and Cabinet members co-presented nationally.
2025	Parent Cabinet goals aligned with the OEC's strategic priorities; tools piloted for OEC division staff engagement with Parent Cabinet members; sustainability planning begins.

Spotlight on Third Sector

Since 2023, Third Sector has served as a strategic partner to the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) and the Parent Cabinet, providing technical assistance to integrate the voices of parents and caregivers into early childhood policy and decisionmaking.^{37,38}

● In 2023, Third Sector:

- Analyzed OEC's internal systems and communication pathways;
- Mapped feedback loops between OEC, the Cabinet, and community stakeholders; and
- Delivered recommendations on governance structure, sustainability planning, and tools for data collection and communication.

● In 2024, Third Sector:

- Supported OEC in strengthening the Cabinet's subcommittees and external advisory committees to create clear and sustainable pathways for parent leadership;
- Engaged OEC staff and Parent Cabinet members to identify effective practices; and
- Developed SOPs for onboarding and offboarding members, meeting protocols, and recruitment templates.

● In 2025, Third Sector's work focused on:

- Aligning Parent Cabinet goals with OEC's broader strategic priorities;
- Gathering input from OEC divisions and parents;
- Developing and piloting tools to support engagement between OEC staff and Parent Cabinet members; and
- Planning for long-term sustainability.

Over the past three years, Third Sector has focused on strengthening feedback loops and decisionmaking processes. These efforts give Parent Cabinet members real opportunities to contribute as both advisors and leaders, and have a tangible impact on the design and implementation of OEC policies. As a result, early childhood policies and programs are better positioned to respond to the needs of families across Connecticut.



Understanding Systems Change Impacts Across Vantage Points

Systems change occurs at multiple levels, and people in different roles see and experience those changes in distinct ways. Parent Cabinet members and the OEC staff who participated in interviews described the changes underway from different vantage points. Each perspective reflects a unique and valid experience of the system in motion, and together they offer a more complete view of early-stage systems transformation.

Parent Cabinet members often reflected on how they were treated, how they contributed, and whether their voices were meaningfully heard. Parents talked about feeling respected as experts in their own lives. They described being invited into decisionmaking early and experiencing real collaboration. One parent explained, *"It was literally a co-design process in every sense of the word."* For them, the difference was helping to shape the Parent Cabinet from the very beginning, instead of reacting to a structure that had already been built.

In contrast, OEC staff more often evaluated whether those relational shifts were being institutionalized as policies and practices, or whether they were consistently implemented across divisions. This perspective connects to the roles and responsibilities staff carry every day. They are expected to build parent engagement into agency processes,

meet state requirements, and manage resources in ways that last through leadership changes. From their point of view, system-level barriers matter. A lack of formal guidelines for working with parents and concerns about sustainability remain pressing challenges. As one staff member noted, *"If I leave, I don't know if this work would continue. There's no system behind it."*

This contrast reveals a key dynamic in early systems change: relational and cultural shifts often happen faster than structural change. Parent Cabinet members are more likely to notice progress because they're living the changes in power and relationship. Meanwhile, agency staff are more likely to notice the constraints because they are responsible for embedding those shifts within bureaucratic systems that are slow to adapt.



Building the Foundation for Sustainable Systems Change

The Water of Systems change framework highlighted above allows us to identify the ways in which OEC's experience designing and launching the Connecticut OEC Parent Cabinet has built and begun institutionalizing the emerging forms of systems change within OEC and the early childhood education sector across the state. The following sections illustrate **early signs of progress, partial or uneven shifts**, and **persistent barriers** identified throughout the Parent Cabinet's work with OEC.

Early Signs of Progress: Relational and Cultural Shifts

The Parent Cabinet has catalyzed relational and cultural changes across the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Parents describe trust-building as the foundation: *"Our voices were really heard. And that made it that much easier when talking to families. You could really speak from a place of truth".*³⁹ Members also emphasized the confidence that came from working alongside peers: *"I got to work hand-in-hand with some other dedicated parent leaders who had similar mindsets as me. They wanted to make a change".*⁴⁰

This trust carried into co-design and shared decisionmaking. Parent input directly shaped initiatives like the statewide parent and caregiver survey, which was adapted with multiple languages, included COVID-specific content,

and a stronger outreach plan. OEC staff recognized the value of this candid feedback, noting, "They're not afraid to tell us, 'this doesn't make sense.' That's incredibly helpful." Parents also helped revise Early Learning and Development Standards, co-designed flyers and outreach materials for Elevate, and advised on family-facing communications.⁴¹

Organizational culture and mindset shifts became evident as OEC staff and parents redefined their roles with one another. OEC staff moved away from seeing parents primarily as recipients of services and started to view them as partners whose insights could help shape program design. New practices of open communication allowed staff to not only welcome critique, but rely on it. Parents started to see themselves as leaders and individuals with expertise. These changes have created a culture with the Parent Cabinet and within the OEC that enables shared decisionmaking power and collaboration.

Families also stepped into more visible leadership. Parents co-presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Conference, co-facilitated statewide learning communities and provided feedback on the Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Care to shape a 5-year plan that will impact nearly 200,000 children under 5 in the state.^{42,43,44} One member reflected on this evolution of leadership: *"I didn't know there was a space for parent leadership until I joined the Parent Cabinet. I never knew how much parent engagement mattered and how parents vocalizing what they need is so important".*⁴⁵

Shared leadership has also been modeled intentionally. For example, the Cabinet's governance committee uses multiple co-chairs to avoid concentrating authority and to normalize power-sharing between parents and staff. One parent described the relational culture this created: *"Because we were so welcomed...it was almost as if you were walking into a new family. Everyone wanted to know your opinion and take the time to get to know each other. It makes us feel heard".*⁴⁶

These shifts were reinforced by concrete initiatives across OEC divisions where Parent Cabinet members played a visible role in shaping programs and practices, including:

- **Family Support Division:**
Members selected "Home Visitor of the Year" awardees and brought authentic parent perspective to a statewide fatherhood conference.⁴⁷
- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Division:**
Parent Cabinet members helped distribute more than 1,000 postcards to families about a new parent portal, making complex systems more accessible.⁴⁸
- **Birth to Three Division:**
Parents co-led subcommittees and participated in the Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC), embedding family voice into IDEA compliance and service oversight.⁴⁹
- **Quality Improvement Division:**
Parents helped define what "quality" means in early childhood programs and refined outreach messaging for the Elevate quality improvement system.⁵⁰

Together, these relational and cultural shifts represent strong early signs of progress, grounded in both trust-building and system-level participation. This form of organizational culture change has happened through normalizing shared leadership, where parent voice is consistently engaged as a central component in OEC's way of working rather than an add-on element. They are laying the groundwork for authentic, systemic collaboration between families and state government.

Partial or Uneven Shifts: Emerging Practices and Policies

As the Parent Cabinet's role – and Cabinet members' relationships with OEC staff – have continued to be developed and clarified, these shifts have begun to be institutionalized within OEC. For example, in 2023, Connecticut passed Public Act 23-160, which formally recognized the OEC Parent Cabinet as a statutory advisory body.⁵¹ By doing so, the state took an important step toward making family voice a permanent part of how it governs. The law requires the OEC commissioner to report to the legislature and embeds the Cabinet within budget and policy processes. It also mandates OEC to allocate a portion of its budget to compensate Cabinet members, create a Parent Cabinet Coordinator position, and other engagement activities.

Since the law's passage, several practices have shifted. Some OEC divisions are identifying opportunities to co-develop materials with Parent Cabinet input, and a quarterly feedback loop between OEC leadership and Cabinet representatives has been instituted.

Additionally, in mid-2024, the OEC hired a Statewide Parent Cabinet Coordinator, signaling another concrete step toward formalizing the Cabinet's operational infrastructure.

These structural shifts in practice and policy were accompanied by moments where parent leadership helped shape statewide reforms. The establishment of the Parent Cabinet in law, combined with parent-led advocacy that helped inform landmark policies like the Early Childhood Endowment, reflects partial systems change. Practices are evolving within OEC to normalize co-creation with parents, and policies are beginning to align with family experiences. While much of the infrastructure is still in development, these shifts signal the growing legitimacy of family voice in shaping both daily operations and long-term state investments in early childhood.⁵²

Third Sector's contributions supported these shifts.

● 2023

Analyzed OEC's systems and communication pathways; mapped feedback loops; provided recommendations on governance, sustainability, and communication tools.

● 2024

Helped strengthen subcommittees and external advisory committees; co-developed SOPs for onboarding/offboarding, meetings, and recruitment; facilitated OEC-parent engagement practices.

● 2025

Aligned Cabinet goals with OEC's strategic priorities; co-designed stakeholder sessions; piloted engagement tools; supported sustainability planning.

While the process of institutionalization is still emergent and uneven across OEC areas of work, these developments have helped the OEC strengthen feedback loops, build infrastructure, and align Cabinet work with agency priorities. Overall, the Parent Cabinet's work has contributed to the enabling conditions for parents to deepen their influence over state policy and OEC practices.

Persistent Barriers: Structural Constraints and System Gaps

Although OEC has made progress in building trust and shifting culture, structural barriers still limit how fully parent engagement can be embedded across the agency. Parent participation often depends on individual champions within the agency rather than being embedded in standardized workflows. As one staff member acknowledged, *"There has not been intentionality to work or connect with the Parent Cabinet...there's a desire to involve the PC more and further define their roles"*.⁵³ This reliance on relationships rather than structures makes parent influence uneven across divisions. Fortunately, the work of developing standardized tools, parental engagement plans, and standard operating procedures has recently begun with support from Third Sector.

The technical complexity of OEC programs can also limit opportunities for meaningful parent influence. For example, staff reflected that involving parents in the federally mandated Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) plan was not effective because *"The juice would not be worth the squeeze"* given its technical nature.⁵⁴

Similarly, Quality Improvement staff noted that professional jargon and field-specific language can unintentionally exclude families: *"When families don't come with that same experience, it can be hard for them to feel engaged and for us to engage them efficiently".*⁵⁵

Parents themselves identified the need for clearer, plain-language materials and more structured onboarding to support their participation. One OEC staff member emphasized that without grounding and context, turnover in the Parent Cabinet can lead to confusion: *"Some of the new members were confused about the ask...helpful reminder to not get stuck because we were working with the same Parent Cabinet members for a while".*⁵⁶

Another recurring barrier is that advisory participation does not always translate into influence over decisions. While parents provide feedback on surveys, portals, or program materials, divisions do not consistently integrate this input into their processes. Staff candidly noted that parents are *"Currently called in when needed and there is no regular cadence of collaboration".*⁵⁷

Finally, existing state systems are most often not designed for co-governance with families. Staff across divisions acknowledged that while family voice is valued, structures, roles, and processes for authentic power-sharing remain underdeveloped. One staff member in OEC's Birth to Three program reflected on their collaboration with the Parent Cabinet: *"We both just aren't sure what we are doing...we are trying to figure out what it is and where we go with the group".*⁵⁸

These persistent barriers highlight the work still ahead. The challenge continues to be moving from individual champions to standardized institutional practices, translating technical complexity into accessible formats for Cabinet members, and developing structures that allow parents not only to advise but also to share in both design and decisionmaking processes.





Marinda Monfilston's Story of Advocacy and Access in Connecticut for the Missing Middle (Region 3)

When Marinda Monfilston moved to Connecticut, she expected the usual challenges of parenting. She did not expect child care to consume half of her family's income or to spend years navigating waitlists, eligibility rules, and inconsistent information. "We were paying 50 percent of our income on child care," she said. "But we don't qualify for Care for Kids even though it's still unaffordable."

Marinda describes her family as part of the "missing middle" households that fall between income thresholds. Resources exist for families with the lowest incomes, yet many middle-income households face the same pressures with far fewer supports. That lived experience shaped her motivation to join the Connecticut Parent Cabinet. "I just felt like, as a parent, the same way that as soon as you have a child, they're giving you books, I should know what options are available," she shared. "It became very clear to me what inequalities and lack of access look like."

Her introduction to the Cabinet came during the pandemic. By that point, her daughter had attended three schools in three years, and Marinda still lacked a clear roadmap for available programs and supports. She learned about the Parent Cabinet through a local Facebook page and decided to apply. "Why not? Why not me?" she remembered thinking. "I was looking for more civic engagement opportunities outside of my day job."

The interview process felt unfamiliar. "I was just naturally nervous because I didn't know what to expect," she said. She remembers the panel as warm, transparent, and encouraging. When she was selected, she learned she would represent Region 3, the largest in the state. "I didn't realize I would be representing an entire region," she said. "I was overjoyed."

Serving on the Cabinet deepened Marinda's understanding of the early childhood system and strengthened her advocacy skills. She listened to parents across diverse communities and saw how sharply challenges varied from town to town. Presenting at conferences, serving on external panels, and completing protective factors training helped build her confidence. Protective factors refer to the social, economic, and community supports that help families remain stable. "I wasn't one of the most vocal parents at first," she said. "But through different opportunities, I became more comfortable with public speaking."

One moment stands out. Marinda spoke at the Governor's press conference announcing a statewide effort to build an early childhood endowment. "It was really about creating an endowment so that more parents can have more affordable child care," she shared. "It's going to take some time, but there's real funding to start making that change."

She also served on a Blue Ribbon Panel led by the Lieutenant Governor, contributing to recommendations that informed recent child care reforms in Connecticut. "It has come full circle," she said. "I've been in the trenches with providers and advocates, and I wouldn't have made those connections without the Parent Cabinet."

For Marinda, success means keeping parent voice visible in decisionmaking. "Continue to have parent voice at the table," she said. Her story shows how lived experience can shape policy and expand access for families across Connecticut.



Strengthening Systems Through Parent Voice: Jennifer St. John's Story (Region 6)

Jennifer St. John did not set out to become an advocate or a statewide leader. Her journey began with a small invitation she almost dismissed. While picking up her oldest child from preschool in Bristol, Connecticut, a teacher noticed her engagement and suggested she join the School Readiness Council. Jennifer remembers her reaction clearly. "I said, 'sure, I do not know what it is, but I will do it.'" She went on to interview, was sworn in, and stepped into a world she did not yet know would shape her future. "It was that one preschool teacher that saw something, and she really kind of sparked that interest, and it has been going ever since."

That first yes led to eight years of service, followed by her role as Bristol's first Parent Ambassador. Jennifer focused on helping families navigate resources that often felt invisible or confusing. "There are so many resources out there that are available for families that people just have zero idea about," she said. Years later, parents returned to thank her for pointing them in the right direction. "I have had families come to me and say, 'Oh my gosh, I remember when you first showed me this, and I have been doing it ever since.'"

By the time Jennifer joined the Parent Cabinet, she had come to understand how access to information shapes outcomes. What excited her was the chance to bring that local experience into statewide decisionmaking. "I definitely saw positive change in doing it locally," she said.

"To me, the appeal was doing it on a broader spectrum." She wanted families across Connecticut to benefit from the same connections and support networks she helped build in Bristol.

Inside the Cabinet, Jennifer quickly stepped into leadership roles. She served on the committee that helped rewrite the Early Learning and Development Standards while completing her degree in Child Studies. That dual perspective strengthened her confidence. "Being able to really delve into that and see where it needs to be reworded and rewritten, I thought that was pretty cool," she said.

The policy environment came with a steep learning curve. "We kind of all just got thrown in," Jennifer said. "It is very scary if you have no background knowledge of it." She believes parent leaders need structured onboarding to navigate legislation, testimony, and state processes with confidence, just as families need clear information to make informed choices.

Jennifer also relied on leadership training she completed prior to joining the Parent Cabinet, which helped her navigate public speaking and policy conversations. "The first half of it is public speaking. They force you to do it whether you are comfortable or not," she said. Speaking alongside executive directors, superintendents, and mayors felt intimidating. Over time, Jennifer learned to trust her lived experience.

While she sees progress, she also sees gaps in visibility and capacity. "Even now, when I tell people I work with OEC [Office of Early Childhood] on the Parent Cabinet, they are like, what the heck is that?" she said. Representing 17 towns, she wishes she had more time to meet families and strengthen those connections.

Jennifer's story reflects the power of community leadership and co-governance. What began with a single invitation grew into statewide influence. Today, she continues to expand her civic role. "I am actually now running for city council for Bristol," she shared. Her journey shows how parent leadership can take root and grow, and how systems change becomes possible when families receive support, information, and a seat at the table.



Mary McCallister's Story of Building a Path for Parent Voice

Mary McAllister's path into statewide parent leadership began at her kitchen table within a three-inch, color-coded binder. As a mother of four and a former preschool teacher in New Britain and West Hartford, she saw firsthand how difficult it is for families to access usable information. "Parents are not given all of the information that they need to actually make an educated decision," she said. Too often, it is "very legalistic" and "over people's heads."

When her oldest son, who is on the autism spectrum, entered early childhood and school systems, Mary experienced how fragmented support could be. She moved between doctors, specialists, teachers, and social services, each with different applications, timelines, and documentation requirements. With support from the Center for Parent Advocacy and Resources, she became the parent who "does not ask a lot of questions, I ask all the questions." Her goal was to "keep basically your own library of legal standards, legislation, policies, medical provisions" so her son could access the services he needed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a longtime Head Start parent liaison invited Mary to join the Parent Cabinet design team. The idea was straightforward. "We want them to be able to talk to a state agency." Mary immediately recognized the opportunity. "Yes. This is what we need. I am more than on board." The team began with a blank slate and a practical question. How could parents be seen as legitimate partners in policy decisions, not outsiders?

They focused on education, co-design, and structure. The group reactivated an inactive early childhood committee that had gone dormant. This committee became a formal connector, meaning a defined and ongoing point of coordination between the Parent Cabinet and existing state and local decisionmaking bodies. Rather than operating informally or in parallel, the Cabinet gained a recognized place within the broader early childhood governance structure.

The group also established a structured system for communication. Grassroots Parent Ambassadors gathered insights and concerns from families in their local communities. Those insights moved through the Parent Cabinet and were then shared directly with the Office of Early Childhood (OEC). Mary described this as a loop, a consistent and repeatable system for communicating parent voice upward through the system. "We needed a connector," she explained. "A loop where grassroots and local feed state."

For Mary, success starts with who gets invited into the conversation. "Ask the actual client first. Not the proxy." She sees the Parent Cabinet as a hub that allows policymakers to reach real families across diverse communities and to "codify the process" so there is "a map for other people to do it." Her work reflects a belief that systems improve when parent voice is not only welcomed, but structurally embedded into how decisions are made.

Implications & Recommendations

Analyzing the experience of incorporating the Parent Cabinet across different areas of OEC's work shows early signs of progress in how trust, collaboration, and shared leadership have developed between Parent Cabinet members and OEC staff. Partial or uneven shifts in policies and processes are also visible where engagement practices vary by division or depend on individual champions, signaling progress that is promising but not yet consistent across the agency. At the same time, persistent barriers remain, particularly around institutionalizing these practices, clarifying roles and processes, and addressing the technical and structural limits of co-governance. The following section offers implications and recommendations for how OEC, the early childhood field, and technical assistance partners can continue to strengthen this work.

Lessons for the Office of Early Childhood (OEC)

The Parent Cabinet has shown what is possible when governance includes those most impacted by policy decisions. The OEC's challenge now is to ensure consistency, visibility, and sustainability. We recognize the OEC has already taken meaningful steps to center family voice. The recommendations below are written to amplify and formalize what is working, to reduce one-off efforts, and to make progress more visible across divisions. Where practices are already underway, we suggest consolidating, standardizing, and scaling rather than starting new work.

Recommendations for OEC:

- Build on existing structures and processes for engaging with Parent Cabinet members to codify minimum standards into one agency playbook for family engagement across divisions, including co-design practices, feedback integration, plain-language communications, and inclusive meeting structures.
- Develop division-specific SOPs that clarify when Cabinet members are consulted for input and when they are empowered to make decisions, and build out refresher trainings at a set cadence.
- Embed predictable line items like translation, facilitation, materials development, and evaluation in annual budgets to stabilize and scale existing supports (e.g., stipends for Cabinet members).
- Strengthen explicit expectations in OEC staff job descriptions, goals, and budgets to make coverage and continuity routine.
- Strengthen structured feedback loops (e.g., meeting notes, quarterly newsletters, etc.) by scheduling regular joint planning sessions with the Cabinet, and create public-facing dashboards to track longer-term progress.

Lessons Learned for how Civil Servants Can Build and Maintain Strong Relationships to Transform Early Childhood Policy

Connecticut's experience offers a compelling and instructive model for other states seeking to institutionalize family voice in early childhood governance. What makes the approach replicable is not only the establishment of the Parent Cabinet itself, but the combination of conditions that allowed it to take root: sustained trust-building between parents and agency staff; alignment between parent leadership and state priorities; and the deliberate design of structures that embed shared decisionmaking into formal policy and administrative processes.

This case study illustrates how the same system can appear very different from different perspectives. Parent Cabinet members often see and feel progress in relationships, trust, and inclusion. OEC staff, tasked with sustaining and scaling that progress, more often see the limits and barriers. Both perspectives matter, and together they will shape the next phase of this work.

Cultural and relational shifts can lead to changes within public systems. However, lasting progress also requires structures, policies, and practices that can withstand staff and leadership turnover. The challenge now is to turn those early relational gains into practices that are equitable, sustainable, and embedded in the system. They cannot depend on only a few champions.

Recommendations for Government Leaders:

- Establish family voice and co-governance as non-negotiable elements of policy development by embedding family engagement into strategic plans, job descriptions, and performance evaluations.
- Prepare for continuity across administration by codifying parent and family engagement practices in formal policies and ordinances, and within administrative budgets.
- Share decisionmaking power with families through advisory roles, family co-chairs, and task forces with authority.
- Make transparency a standard practice by mapping decisionmaking pathways and publicly communicating how family input is used.
- Train administrative staff to build buy-in across agencies to reinforce shared commitment to family/parent voice.



Lessons for Third Sector as a Technical Assistance Partner

Third Sector's role has been to strengthen the Parent Cabinet's infrastructure and alignment with the OEC's priorities. Its work has included analyzing internal systems and feedback loops, supporting the OEC in strengthening subcommittees and advisory structures, co-developing onboarding and recruitment tools, and piloting engagement practices that connect parents and agency staff in sustainable ways.

This experience shows that technical assistance partners are most effective when they help integrate parent leadership into everyday operations. The work to sustain a new Cabinet is to ensure they are a part of how the public system functions over time.

Recommendations for Third Sector

- Continue to build tools and templates (such as SOPs, onboarding processes, and recruitment materials) that can be adapted by other states or agencies working to institutionalize parent voice.
- Share lessons about how to map and improve feedback loops between parents, agencies, and stakeholders to help ensure family perspectives consistently inform decisionmaking.
- Support agencies in aligning parent leadership structures with broader strategic goals, programs, and initiatives. When these structures are integrated into core governance processes, they avoid becoming siloed or disconnected from agency priorities.
- Invest in co-design practices that bring parents and staff together to develop tools, build capacity, and plan for sustainability. This approach fosters shared ownership and makes systems change efforts more durable.



Conclusion

The Connecticut OEC Parent Cabinet shows progress in building trust, expanding inclusive child care practices, and shifting power toward parents and caregivers. Moreover, the establishment of universal Pre-K as a state-level goal through recent legislation increasing child care funding provides a significant opportunity for OEC and its Parent Cabinet to test and strengthen its engagement approach at the outset of upcoming policy changes. These gains, while not yet fully institutionalized, are foundational to durable systems change. As a result, the Parent Cabinet stands at a critical point in its development. Sustaining the early gains will require continued investment in people. It also depends on the deliberate integration of inclusive practices into agency operations. Just as important is the ongoing co-creation of policy, rather than relying on one-time consultations.

Early Start CT shows the state's capacity for large-scale reform. It offers a model for how streamlined systems can better serve families and providers. If the Parent Cabinet's role is reinforced through clear protocols, adequate resources, and shared governance structures, Connecticut can move toward a stronger, more inclusive system. In that system, families are not only advisors who provide input. They are also partners who help shape policy, improve equity, and strengthen trust between communities and state agencies.

The experience of the Parent Cabinet also raises important lessons about governance committee models. We are learning that formal structures can create consistency and sustainability, but they must remain flexible enough to adapt to parents' lived realities and evolving state priorities. The Cabinet's governance committee demonstrates that shared leadership requires clarity of roles,



transparent decisionmaking processes, and sustained investment in capacity on both the parent and agency sides.

At the same time, the relational findings point to an area the field must study more deeply. Parents describe meaningful shifts in trust, belonging, and recognition as leaders. These outcomes are harder to measure but are also critical to sustaining family engagement. Understanding how relational progress lays the groundwork for stronger policies and practices is still an area of opportunity in early childhood systems change. Another challenge is learning how to sustain those gains during leadership transitions.

Sustainability and Replicability

Connecticut's experience shows that the conditions enabling progress, such as trust-building, alignment between parent leadership and agency priorities, and intentional co-design, are also what make this work replicable. Together, these features make Connecticut's model both distinctive and instructive. It shows that equitable systems change begins with relationships and trust, but endures only when those relational gains are codified through clear protocols, shared accountability, predictable resource flows, and practices that embed family engagement into daily governance. Given these learnings, Connecticut's Parent Cabinet can serve as a roadmap for how state agencies move from engaging parents as stakeholders to partnering with them as co-governors in building more responsive, equitable, and outcomes-driven public systems.

If the Cabinet's vision and mission are fully realized:

- Programs and policies will be designed and evaluated in partnership with families, making them more equitable, culturally responsive, and accessible.
- Trust between communities and government will deepen, leading to earlier and more meaningful engagement with services.
- Decisionmaking will be transparent, with clear feedback loops showing how parent input shapes outcomes.
- Staff across agencies will be trained and expected to share power with families, supported by protocols and structures that make co-governance the norm.
- Public systems will continuously learn from families in order to be more outcomes-focused, adaptive, and responsive to emerging needs.

With sustained investment, clear roles, and a shared vision, Connecticut can show what's possible when families are treated as true partners. In that future, families are not only listened to but help shape systems that are more equitable, responsive, and effective for every child.

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