

Boston Children Thrive:

# A Toolkit for Parent Engagement and Leadership Development



*Thrive in 5's mission was to ensure that children of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and languages have the opportunities and support they need for success in school and beyond.*

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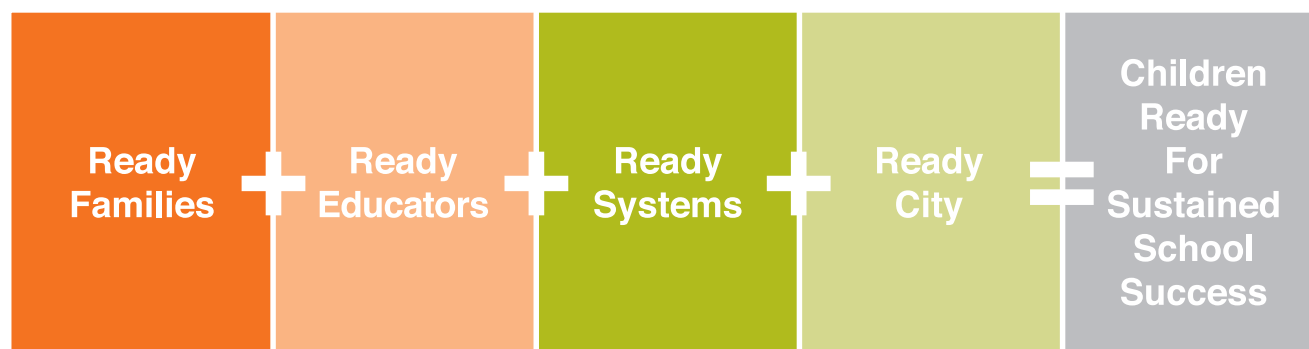
## INTRODUCTION

This Toolkit was developed to provide materials, implementation details, and lessons learned about Thrive in 5's parent leadership model. The Toolkit describes key features of Thrive in 5's approach to parent leadership in two of its strategies, Boston Children Thrive (BCT) and Screen to Succeed (STS). The Toolkit was developed with support from the Barr Foundation. The tools and materials in this Toolkit may be reproduced and used or adapted, but we ask that you identify this Toolkit as the source.

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Please note that while Thrive in 5 ended as a formal initiative in June 2016, many of the components of Boston Children Thrive have been integrated into agency practices and will continue on in the community. Screen to Succeed and components of Boston Children Thrive will continue at the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley (United Way) through the DRIVE (Data and Resources Investing in Vital Early Education) initiative.

Thrive in 5 would like to acknowledge all of the Boston Children Thrive, Boston Family Engagement Network, and Screen to Succeed agency partners, including all staff and Parent Partners. Your strong leadership and collaboration has pushed the boundaries of family engagement work in Boston and led to authentic culture and systems change. We also wish to thank Randi Freundlich and Samilla Quiroa, who conducted all of the interviews with agency staff and Parent Partners, which formed the basis of this toolkit. For the full list of partners, please see [page 21](#).



## What Was Thrive in 5?

Thrive in 5's mission was to ensure that children of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and languages have the opportunities and support they need for success in school and beyond. In partnership with the City of Boston and United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Thrive in 5 fostered collaboration among all of the critical people in a child's life — parents, early education and care providers, teachers, and health and human services system professionals — to create an environment that ensures every child has the opportunities and support they need for success in school and in life. Launched in 2008, Thrive in 5 worked to build community capacity to support school readiness, strengthen the quality of existing services, expand and create programs to address unmet needs, and measure progress to ensure accountability.

## What Were Thrive in 5's Key Strategies?

Thrive in 5 had several main strategies to accomplish these goals.

### Ready Families

A family that is in the strongest position to support their child's learning and development; achieved through **Boston Children Thrive (BCT)**, an innovative community and family engagement model in targeted neighborhoods.

### Ready Educators

High-quality, well-aligned early childhood care and education; achieved through **Ready Educators Quality Improvement Project** and **Boston K1DS**, which focused on quality improvements in early education and care settings throughout the city.

### Ready Systems

Proactive, coordinated systems (health care, early intervention, social services, and others) that promote school readiness through early screening and intervention; achieved through **Screen to Succeed**, which aims to establish universal developmental screening of young children across Boston.

### Ready City

A city that makes school readiness a civic priority.

# BOSTON CHILDREN THRIVE (BCT)



## What Was Boston Children Thrive?

Boston Children Thrive (BCT) served as the “Ready Families” strategy of Thrive in 5 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. BCT was a neighborhood-based initiative that built community capacity to empower and engage families in their children’s learning and healthy development, starting at birth. A major BCT goal was to reach and engage families who are likely to be disconnected from services to support their children’s development and school readiness. The target population included low-income families, families of color, immigrant families, and families whose first language is not English. Hub agencies in each neighborhood led the BCT effort. Please see the [BCT Overview](#) and [BCT logic model](#).

## How Were Hub Agencies Selected?

In 2010, hub agencies in five neighborhoods in Boston were chosen to receive funding and implement the BCT work in their communities:

- + Allston-Brighton (Family Nurturing Center);
- + East Boston (East Boston Social Centers);
- + Fields Corner, Dorchester (DotHouse Health);
- + Roxbury/Dudley (Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative);
- + South End/Lower Roxbury (United South End Settlements).
- + In 2014, South Boston joined the BCT initiative (South Boston Neighborhood House) with support from the Herman and Frieda L. Miller Foundation.

These neighborhoods were selected because they have both strong networks of support and high concentrations of families with young children least connected to early childhood and family services.

The selected hub agencies were chosen as a result of an open, competitive process, including comprehensive responses to a [Request for Proposals \(RFP\)](#) and site visits. The selected hub agencies who originally led the BCT work included a community health center, a community organizing neighborhood initiative, family support agencies, and agencies providing childcare. The hubs have become strong lead agencies for implementation of Thrive in 5’s overall strategies in the community.

## How Did Thrive in 5 Implement Boston Children Thrive?

Although the implementation and programming of Boston Children Thrive (BCT) was unique to each neighborhood, the BCT model contained these core components across the city:

- + **A hub agency** (lead agency) in each neighborhood responsible for convening, organizing, and providing a backbone structure for local efforts.
- + **Parent Partners** (parent leaders), the face of BCT on the ground. Parent Partners are parents and caregivers from the neighborhood who are stipended to conduct peer-to-peer outreach with ethnically and linguistically diverse communities. Parent Partners also take an active role in determining appropriate programming and supporting its implementation. As part of Thrive in 5’s Screen to Succeed initiative, Parent Partners have been trained to administer the **Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)** to families whose young children were not in an early education and care setting (Please see [page 6](#) for more information on Screen to Succeed). Parent Partners serve as connectors, building relationships between isolated families and community-based organizations, and leading activities that engage families in culturally-responsive activities to support children’s development.

- + **School Readiness Roundtable (SRR)**, a leadership board comprised of partnering agencies, parent leaders, and other key stakeholders. The SRRs in each neighborhood create and implement an aligned neighborhood network of resources and supports for families and caregivers. In each neighborhood, Boston Children Thrive is led by this coalition of parents, early education programs, libraries, health and social service providers, businesses, and other stakeholders who meet monthly to design and implement strategies to connect families to existing resources, create new opportunities, and alter services to better meet families' needs.
- + **An array of programs for families** that build a foundation of enriching, developmentally-appropriate activities and events in the community for families with young children. By participating in these activities, children have access to the high quality experiences needed to promote their healthy development, parents gain the knowledge and skills to support their child's early learning, and families develop critical social connections to one another, neighborhood organizations, and the broader community. Although programs vary from community to community, some core activities included playgroups, field trips, family nights, parent trainings and workshops, and home visits to newborn babies through a Boston program, **Welcome Baby**.<sup>1</sup>
- + **A membership card system** (launched in 2012), where a free membership card with a bar code for each adult caregiver was issued to participating families. The card was designed to be scanned when families participated in planned activities. The membership card system will continue at United Way as part of the DRIVE initiative, and it will transition to a mobile application, through a partnership with **SchoolCNXT**<sup>2</sup> that is launching during summer, 2016. The mobile application allows families to view nearby events, register and sign in to those events, and earn and track their participation points.
- + **A learning community**, comprised of hub agency and parent representatives from each neighborhood, met regularly during the first three years of BCT to share learnings and promote cross-community actions.
- + **Parent-led projects**, some of BCT's most engaging and popular activities were designed and led by parents themselves. Parents in the neighborhood identified gaps in programming, completed an application with a work plan and budget, and were granted funds to plan and implement new projects and activities, such as a new playgroup or workshop that met the language and cultural needs of an underserved community. **The Parent Leadership Project Guidelines can be found here**. Thrive in 5 and the Boston Family Engagement Network sponsored neighborhood-based teams of parent leaders who planned and implemented activities in their community that address the real needs and challenges of local families. Through the process, parent leaders support one another as they develop valuable skills in community organizing, planning, budgeting and advocacy, as well as build their network of contacts in the community.

<sup>1</sup> The *Welcome Baby* program, developed by the Family Nurturing Center, offers a celebratory home visit to families with newborns. Visitors bring a gift bag for the family, and share information about activities, resources and services in the community. It's also an opportunity to promote literacy and reinforce the importance of reading in child development and school readiness.

<sup>2</sup> SchoolCNXT is a flexible, mobile/web-based parent engagement platform that connects parents, teachers, students, and administrators, providing an efficient and effective way to share news and important information; send reminders; and create an engaged, connected community. To learn more about SchoolCNXT, please visit [www.schoolcnxt.com](http://www.schoolcnxt.com).





Each hub agency, with input from their SRR, was held accountable for community planning in their neighborhood. [The planning tool can be found here.](#)

### What Is the Boston Family Engagement Network (BFEN)?

The **Boston Family Engagement Network (BFEN)** is a citywide coalition focused on raising awareness about the importance of family engagement in the life of a young child. It is comprised of parents, community partners, early educators and family support workers who are invested in ensuring that beginning at birth, all young children have access to a quality educational experience whether at home, in school, or in child care. BFEN's work is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care's Coordinated Family and Community Engagement (CFCE) Grant. All services are free of charge to families.

BFEN began a close collaboration with Thrive in 5 as the BCT work took hold. The BCT hub agency staff and staff from BFEN-funded agencies across Boston met on a bimonthly basis to align their work. Seeing the benefits of Parent Partners to BCT hub agencies, BFEN adopted the Parent Partner model and began to allocate specific funding for this work. The BFEN coordinator felt that parent leaders were very important.

#### BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:

*"We've been moving towards, 'Where are the parent interests, where do their strengths lie, and how can we integrate them into the work?' It's been a way to make sure that parents are still in leadership and decision-making roles, but also integrated into other parts of what's happening."*

### What Is Screen to Succeed?

Screen to Succeed is a groundbreaking initiative for achieving universal child development screening for young children in the city of Boston. Understanding children's developmental progress — individually and citywide — creates opportunities for prevention and intervention in the critical "brain building" phase of a child's life, when services are more effective and less costly. The data collected through Screen to Succeed allow families, teachers, health providers, and the city to take a data-driven approach to early childhood, making informed, strategic decisions to tailor support and resources to the children, families, and communities that need them most. Screen to Succeed will continue its efforts to achieve universal developmental screening through the DRIVE (Data and Resources Investing in Vital Early Education) initiative at United Way. Key elements of Screen to Succeed include:

+ **Peer-to-Peer Parent Screeners:**

Based on the BCT Parent Partner model, Screen to Succeed utilizes a peer-to-peer model, hiring and training parents in Boston neighborhoods to become Parent Screeners. Parent Screeners connect to families in their communities, conduct the ASQ screening during home visits or in neighborhood-based settings, and offer resources and information for families based on screening results. Parent Screeners represent multiple cultures and languages, creating connections to isolated communities and ensuring screening is available to a diverse range of families.

+ **Parents Screening Their Own Children:**

With the support of trained staff, parents complete the ASQ screening of their own child during parent-child playgroup sessions and home visits. Screening helps parents and caregivers understand more about their child's developmental strengths and challenges. Parents are also connected to community resources and provided with activities to engage in with their children at home.

+ **Early Education and Care Providers:**

Screen to Succeed partners with early education and care providers to gather data from ASQ screening conducted in their programs, generally when a child enters the program or moves to a new classroom. Through their involvement in Screen to Succeed, early education programs are increasing their capacity to use the screening process to tailor classroom activities and professional development opportunities, and to better engage families in supporting their children's learning and development at home.

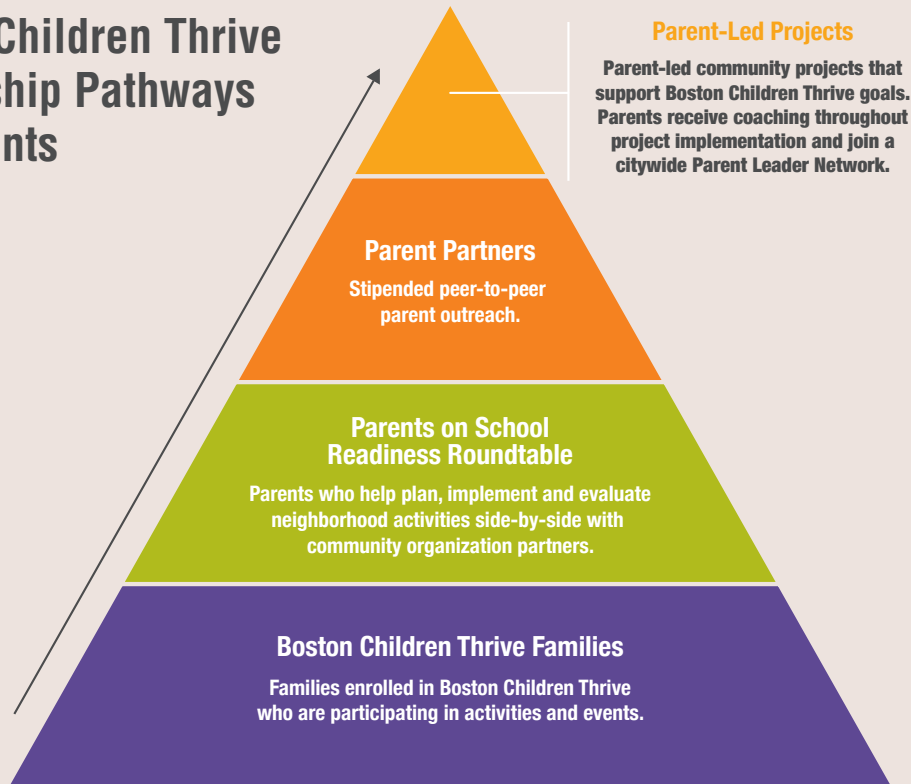
neighborhoods (Allston-Brighton and Dorchester) in 2013. Starting in 2015, BFEN Parent Partners citywide have been trained to administer the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), resulting in an integrated Parent Partner/Parent Screener role. Parent Screeners receive extensive training on the ASQ, including completing and scoring the questionnaire, conducting outreach to families, sensitively sharing results, and connecting families to referrals as needed. [See excerpts from the Parent Screener Handbook here.](#)



Parent Screeners were initially piloted in two Boston

# PARENT LEADERSHIP PATHWAY

## Boston Children Thrive Leadership Pathways for Parents



### What Is the Parent Leadership Pathway?

The Parent Leadership Pathway is an approach to engage parents and help them take on leadership roles in the lives of their families, their neighborhoods, and the larger community. As families participate in BCT activities in general, they become more engaged in planning and evaluating activities. From that experience, some parents become interested in taking on leadership roles as Parent Partners and ultimately may lead community projects that meet community needs.

### Why Parent Partners?

Thrive in 5 believed that mobilizing parent leadership is a key strategy toward meeting the goal that every Boston child would enter kindergarten ready to succeed. For those families least likely to be connected

with resources and supports, Thrive in 5's model included parent leaders in these neighborhoods as *partners* along with agency staff. Parents were stipended to conduct outreach with underserved and immigrant families, to help connect these families to resources, and to conduct developmental screenings of young children in order to raise awareness about children's development and refer them to appropriate services if needed.

The Parent Partner model is highly effective in reaching families. Talking to other parents — especially parents who are similar racially, ethnically, and linguistically — has been found to be an effective way to reach many parents who may not be connected to formal services and resources.



*In one neighborhood, agency staff knew they needed to find parents representing the diversity of the neighborhood.*

**FORMER COORDINATOR FOR BOSTON CHILDREN THRIVE:**

*“The purpose of BCT, at its most basic, was that we were trying to connect disconnected families to each other, and to what was available to them — what better way to do that than a parent in the neighborhood?”*

.....

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*“We wrote that into our proposal [to Thrive in 5]. We had meeting after meeting after meeting. What countries we were going to pursue parents from? We finally agreed on that list — people to speak Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic.”*

.....

**COORDINATOR FOR THE BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK:**

*“From what I’ve heard, what we do here in Boston about Parent Partners is not common in other parts of the state, not at all. One of the [state] grant requirements is to strengthen parent leadership, but people are not using the Parent Partner model. People may be doing training or other activities — they could have parents attending council meetings and such, but not the level of involvement that we have here.”*

**What Is the Role of Parent Partners?**

Some agencies treat Parent Partners as a stipended position, with expectations that Parent Partners will work between 10 and 20 hours per month. Parent Partners most commonly:

- + reach out to other families in the neighborhood,
- + recruit families to attend activities,
- + develop and lead projects and programming,
- + help with events run by the agency’s family engagement programs,
- + participate in School Readiness Roundtables and other community meetings,
- + support families with completing the ASQ, and
- + build and strengthen relationships with other agencies in their community.

The model used in Boston is unique.

## Parent Partners as Parent Screeners

Thrive in 5's Screen to Succeed initiative focuses on achieving universal developmental screenings of young children across Boston. In addition to children being screened in early education and care programs, Screen to Succeed hired and trained "Parent Screeners," initially in two neighborhoods.

Because Parent Screeners are from a variety of cultural backgrounds and speak a range of languages, they are well received by families because families feel comfortable talking with them. Once the children are screened by their parents with support from Parent Screeners, the Parent Screeners score the questionnaire and share the results with the parents. Parent Screeners are trained on how to share the results with families, and they provide parents with strategies and referrals to support their child in their developmental growth, such as sharing age-appropriate activities for the home and referring parents to neighborhood activities like playgroups. Parent Screeners also connect families to early intervention and special education services.

The Parent Screener process is a natural complement to all the other family engagement work. It helps parents understand more about child development, and it stresses the importance of parents' role as the child's first teacher. Some parents may not understand why they should be involved in activities like playgroups — or may not know about all the activities going on — so they may get connected to the neighborhood resources after the screening.

Some parents have also made dramatic changes in their parenting after completing the ASQ with a Parent Screener:

*"It has changed me a lot. I no longer just focus on cleaning and cooking. I focus on playing with my baby when she's awake. I only do those things when she sleeps. I spend more time with her, I take her out more often. ...Now I've learned the right way to bring her up. I take her out to play in the park, it's good for her body. She eats better, and she's happier. ...She frequents the library to play. Now I know what she needs."*<sup>3</sup>

## What Are Parent Partners' Informal Outreach Strategies?

Parent Partners have tried a number of different approaches for connecting with families in their communities. They conduct outreach at local supermarkets, churches, laundromats, parks, WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) offices, farmer's markets, and health centers. Many found that word-of-mouth was most effective. As they shared information about programs, services, and events to their own friends and neighbors, they would ask families to share the information with their friends and networks. Connecting with parents of the same cultural background helped to reach those who might not be aware of the resources, or who might not understand them due to language barriers. Parent leaders who spoke the same language were better able to build trust with families and help them feel more comfortable attending programs or events. Families reported that they felt comfortable talking with and getting information from another parent.

### AGENCY STAFF:

*"My Parent Partners are basically my staff. They are my eyes, my ears, my hands, my feet in the community. Since these parents are very familiar with the community and the resources, they do a lot of the outreach. They connect with other parents more so than I do."*

<sup>3</sup> From *Boston Children Thrive in 5: Connecting Families, Building Community. Year 3 – Evaluation Brief*. Prepared for Thrive in 5; Authored by a University of Massachusetts cross-disciplinary team. November 2014.

As parents themselves, Parent Partners become a trusted community representative for other families, especially for immigrant families who are unfamiliar with the resources and services available to them.

### Have Parent Partners Taken on Other Staff Responsibilities?

Many Parent Partners have been trained to conduct Welcome Baby visits with families with newborns. More recently, Parent Partners have been trained to lead Read & Rise,<sup>4</sup> a 6-week literacy program, for other families. A typical stipend (at the time of writing this report) is \$150 per month per Parent Partner. Other Parent Partners have been trained to facilitate parent-child playgroups. Most parents are paid through stipends, although a few agencies pay an hourly wage for specific activities.

#### AGENCY STAFF:

*"They get paid \$10 per hour, they have a job description that covers the scope of the work within the Family Engagement activities. We meet on a regular basis. I try to bring them with me to outreach events; I just printed business cards for them. I'm trying to push them to see themselves as representatives of our agency. This is a job, it has clear expectations. The expectations are high but not impossible."*



#### AGENCY STAFF:

*"Parent Partners are doing everything. The only staff are me and the four Parent Partners. They do Welcome Baby, Ages & Stages screening, they help run the playgroup, they do outreach. They get paid a stipend. One person gets paid per visit; the other 3 get a monthly stipend; I budget it out. Now that we are doing Read & Rise, I pay them more for that. ...There's also a kind of a social work component to it. They are talking to parents about reading to their children, and they are teaching them how to navigate and learn how to advocate for themselves."*

### What Are Lessons Learned from the Parent Leadership Pathway?

Thrive in 5's goal was that family engagement work would become parent-driven. The following are key lessons learned from Thrive in 5's parent leadership work in Boston that can also apply to any family engagement efforts.

#### 1 Agencies Must Give Parents a True Voice.

Agency staff made changes from being *agency-focused* to *family-focused*. Part of this change happened through giving parents a true voice in how things were done. Many professionals were surprised by the ideas that parents offered, and they took advantage of parents' perspectives to make needed changes.

<sup>4</sup> Created by Scholastic, the Read and Rise program provides families with hands-on strategies for building literacy at home, reinforces the fact that parents are their child's first and most important teacher, and builds text-rich environments at home by providing take-home books and other parent resources for families who participate in the program.

*Parents should have a seat at the table to influence planning and key decisions, including services and budget, which affect them and their families.*

**BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:**

*“My perspective on Parent Partners, when it’s done well, it’s very valuable. In the beginning, people were skeptical about the Parent Partner role, what it would be, how do you balance between families who are ‘clients’ and shifting them into a decision making role? But I think over time, as people started to build relationships with families and really encourage them to sit at the table, a lot of people saw the value in it, working from the strength of the parent and really hearing their voices about what they thought was the need, and how they could work to make that happen. I heard a lot of positive feedback about it.”*

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*“The big thing with Thrive in 5, they wanted the parents deciding the budget. So when we did the budgets, it started with the parents and getting all of their priorities. Then we would present that to the big group. And it all came from the parents, which is what we’ve now adopted — it’s all parent driven. The budget talks start with them because it’s important for them to make the decisions.”*

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*“We began to ask the parents what they thought our families needed, and to really listen. One year they had the idea of holding a yard sale — families needed clothing, toys and equipment. And most of the organizing and work was done by parents. It was a great event, it raised some money, and built the skills of the parents who organized it.”*

The School Readiness Roundtable (SRR) meets monthly in each neighborhood. In order for parents’ voices to be heard, and for parents to be involved in decision making around the direction, budget, and activities of the neighborhood initiative, parent representation on the SRR is important. Traditionally, staff had primarily attended these types of neighborhood council meetings hosted by local agencies. A cultural shift was needed to make these meetings welcoming and comfortable for parents.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*“We didn’t have any parents in the beginning. I required that one of the Parent Partners had to come, so they could report at the Roundtable what the parents were doing. Some parents didn’t want to stand up and talk because they were not comfortable with the professionals... [One parent partner] would come when [her child] was a baby, and rock him to sleep at the meeting. [Another Parent Partner],*

*who was taking English classes, would get nervous at the Roundtable meeting. I would look at her and signal to slow down. And she talked perfectly."*

## **2 Agencies Must Shift Perspective from Serving Families to Partnering With Families.**

Many agencies went through a period of adjustment, where their perceptions of families changed from viewing parents as service recipients to being equal partners in planning for the larger community of children and families. The implementation of the Parent Leadership Pathway has also led to shifts in other community organizations who now contact the hub agencies for Parent Partner input before moving forward with planned events.

### **FORMER BOSTON CHILDREN THRIVE COORDINATOR:**

*"I saw that some agencies really have it in their DNA to think about parents as partners rather than service recipients, that they are experts in their own right. Agencies that already had that in them, they really were able to make Parent Partners be successful, and were able to contribute to this collaborative vision. The agencies that really felt it could contribute to the progression of the model."*

## **3 Agencies Must Hire Parent Partners Who Represent the Ethnic, Racial, and Linguistic Diversity of the Community.**

Parent Partners have been most successful when they are residents and/or active members of the neighborhood in which they are working. Boston is a city of neighborhoods, and each neighborhood is characterized by distinct demographic groups. Agencies greatly benefit from having Parent Partners who reflect the diversity of their community, as the Parent Partners can connect with previously disconnected families in their own primary languages, and build trust based on common cultural and life experiences.

### **AGENCY STAFF:**

*"For us it's a vital part of the work we do. Parent Partners being reflective of the population served is really important — it helps us to reach families we might not reach."*

As parents themselves in their neighborhoods, Parent Partners develop expertise in their neighborhood's programming. Parent Partners regularly provide families with specialized program referrals and recommendations, such as introducing a parent to the Spanish-speaking children's librarian or to the Vietnamese nutritionist at a local WIC office.

### **AGENCY STAFF:**

*"We started by trying to connect with all the different families in East Boston, all the different cultures, because it's so diverse. So we took a look at the census that had just been done in 2010. We had a lot of fresh data from that...We say Spanish or Latino, but what is it? So we really dove into that. You have Colombians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and they...don't all like to be grouped as one. We started looking for representatives of each of those communities, communities within the communities. That's how we came up with [Parent Partners from] Mexico, El Salvador, and Colombia, and Morocco. Arabic culture is huge here, more than we even knew back in 2011 when we first started. We didn't know they've been here for 16 years! This has drawn them out."*



#### 4 Agencies Must Clearly Define Roles, Supervision and Training.

Agency staff and Parent Partners both benefit when roles are clearly defined. When responsibilities are not laid out and communicated to Parent Partners, agency staff and Parent Partners may feel uncertain of their exact purpose and usefulness. Parents often accept Parent Partners positions because they know that the role will allow them to grow and provide professional development opportunities, so it is important for agencies to have clear expectations and plans for supporting their Parent Partners.

##### AGENCY STAFF:

*"[Parent Partners] all have their jobs, their assignments. One does the calendar, somebody interprets it, somebody goes to the businesses and delivers them. So they all have their things, and our Parent Partner monthly meetings, we average at least 10 of them at the meeting."*

##### AGENCY STAFF:

*"Some of the success — giving them the freedom to come up with their ideas, going out into their communities and them finding out what parents want. It's not me saying, 'you have to do x, y, and z.' They're telling me that they're going to do a, b, and c. Roles and responsibilities have become huge with us, who's doing the calendar, who's bringing flyers, who's getting the information, this is part of their ongoing responsibility. If somebody hasn't done their thing, others will help."*

Parent Partners benefit from specific, targeted training to help them fulfill their role successfully. Some neighborhoods set up foundational training for Parent Partners. Others sent them to trainings on specialized areas in which they would be involved,

such as Welcome Baby or the Ages & Stages Questionnaire. Many agencies made efforts to find out what their Parent Partners wanted to learn, and they found ways to support their Parent Partners in gaining knowledge and experience on these topics. Agencies and Parent Partners have shared that they think all Parent Partners should be trained on a few topics when starting, including how to conduct outreach to families, write professional emails, develop an elevator pitch, and prepare a basic program plan and budget.

##### AGENCY STAFF:

*"When they worked on the Parent-Led Project, some of them needed to learn all kinds of things like making a flyer, creating a budget, and asking for donations. Some parents especially lacked these skills, but learned quickly when given the opportunity. We gave some 'mini' trainings. And we offered encouragement and support, which was a big part of it."*

*For the model to be successful, agencies need to allocate staff resources to support, train, supervise and mentor the Parent Partners.*

**FORMER BOSTON CHILDREN THRIVE COORDINATOR:**

*“Organizations had to have the capacity, in terms of the staff resources and other resources, to be able to do it comprehensively — to provide the right training, support, supervision, communication, and to really commit to it, not just be going through the motions.”*

.....

**BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:**

*“You have to have committed staff that are working with and providing support to Parent Partners, it’s almost like another full-time job, debriefing with them, having regular meetings with them, taking time to hear their voice, delving into the training and support. That’s where we’ve had a lot of challenges, trying to figure out, with limited funding, how you continue to support them that so they have professional development.”*

**5 Parent-Led Projects Help Parents Gain Confidence in their Skills.**

Hub agencies set aside funds for Parent Partners and other parents in their neighborhoods to design and lead activities for families in their communities. These projects provided concrete ways for parents to be involved in community programs, and gain leadership skills as well as skills in creating, planning, budgeting, and implementing their projects. Parents with successful proposals generally received \$3,000 each, where \$1,500 was used for program implementation and materials, and \$1,500 was used to compensate parents’ planning time. However, exact amounts of grants varied by neighborhood.

In some cases, Parent-Led Projects helped to identify parents who were leaders but had not yet become involved. The hub agencies usually had a staff person designated to support and assist the parent leader with planning and implementation.

Many parent leaders were able to gain confidence in their abilities through these projects. Agencies also benefitted, as the parent leaders brought new and creative energy to what may have been "routine" activities. Examples of Parent-Led Projects include Duplo Days, a monthly playgroup held in the local library where a child and caregiver can play together; Vietnamese Book Club, a monthly group for Vietnamese families held in the local library where children and caregivers read children’s books in Vietnamese and work on an accompanying activity; and tours of a local grocery store that was new to a neighborhood.

**PARENT PARTNER:**

*“We...were allowed to decide what we wanted to choose. It was for children 0 to 5. We decided to read, to encourage parents to go to the library. We were a group of five people, it was a challenge, people from different cultures, different ideas, and everybody wanted to be the leader. So we needed to put it all together to get a good creation. And we did. Sometimes we wanted to quit, but we didn’t...One was good at managing the money, the other was good at writing. In my case, I am good at creating and thinking about what to do. Another was very organized. One parent is from Haiti, she speaks Creole, I am from Dominican Republic, I speak Spanish, and another one is from America, and another person is Puerto Rican. Everybody is from different countries. At the end, everybody was happy with the creation we made.”*

Additional testimonials regarding learnings and success stories can be found [here](#).

## What Are Some Challenges of the Parent Partner Model?

### 1 Negotiating Roles: Parents First, “Staff” Second

Having Parent Partners who are residents or active community members leads to many benefits for the agency, as the Parent Partners can connect to other residents and build trusting relationships. At the same time, agencies must help Parent Partners balance their staff and community member roles, and also support Parent Partners in their own challenging experiences and situations.

#### AGENCY STAFF:

*“The biggest thing is that we all work and live in the community — some of the families that have been referred to us, sometimes [Parent Partners] may know that person already. We are just making sure that confidentiality is in place.”*



#### BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:

*“I think it’s a tricky fine line. It is different when families’ basic needs are not being met, because that’s priority. In order for somebody to function in a leadership role they have to be secure in their own basic situation. So it’s challenging, especially if you’ve had a parent who has been strong, and kind of promoted them to this leadership role, and then they fall back, based on whatever’s going on in the home, of course that takes precedence. So figuring out how do you support that is not easy. And yes, Parent Partners are almost like employees because we integrate them into the life of the program. So I don’t know how you separate the two, I think some of it just has to do with, as you’re outreaching and recruiting, making sure that people are ready to take on that next role.”*

### 2 Lack of Training and Work Experience

Most Parent Partners accept the position because it is part-time and flexible, and many find it to be a useful transition back into the workforce or a supportive first job if they have not previously worked. Keeping in mind the training and supervision needs identified in the “Lessons Learned” section, agencies sometimes experience challenges with their Parent Partners around issues of professionalism.

#### AGENCY STAFF:

*“This is different, kind of like an internship model. There’s a lot of mentoring and a lot more training that’s seen as an asset. It’s not like this is your job so you should know it. That’s what makes it special, but that’s what makes it exhausting. And I think without that mentoring and capacity building piece built in, it would not be successful or sustainable.”*



**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"For the majority of the Parent Partners I've had, professional skills and training is needed. It can be frustrating to provide the level of professional guidance needed for a Parent Partner to succeed in the job. Sometimes a person who is coming in seeking resources, they also know that person. So to keep that professionalism can be a little hard."*

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**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"It's a lot of extra work, I can understand why people say we don't have the time. I understand the challenges of the other agencies. It's not all 'kumbaya' over here. All the training in the world, some days, I feel like saying 'you're staff now! Remember when you were gung ho about being responsible and accountable?'"*

Despite the lack of work experience and training among Parent Partners, agencies realize that the same social issues that impact their clients also affect their Parent Partners. Agencies do their best to find the time to support their Parent Partners, as they understand that the benefits of Parent Partners often outweigh the cost of investing in training and developing the Parent Partners.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"For parents who are starting to foray into the world of work... they needed more support sometimes around getting things done. So if you took on a role as lead, in a certain area, they probably need extra support around the task at hand. As an example, one mom who was doing a project, or even the mom doing the playgroup, [they needed] a lot of support around organizing, doing outreach, messaging and ways to promote, and branding the playgroup, building relationships with families, because once again these are skill sets. Even if you're an interested parent coming in, it doesn't mean than you don't need help or training support to be able to effectively manage those tasks."*

### 3 Lack of Staff Resources

Staff resources are needed in order to spend time recruiting and hiring Parent Partners as well as to provide enough supervision and training support to Parent Partners. Agencies are under-resourced and staff are overextended as they try to meet other deadlines and responsibilities.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"It's hard, you want to help these Parent Partners but at what cost? I can't invest all my time...I have to get the reports done and other things. Striking that balance, but being realistic. These folks are coming to us with lack of soft skills, or they might have the soft skills, but they don't have any technical skills. It's diamonds in the rough."*

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"Issues of staff time — even for me to meet with my Parent Partners, let's say I'd like you to do a calendar...Then they [Parent Partner] did the calendar, and I'd have to look at it, correct it or give them feedback. The parents too, they don't always have the time that I have, they are parents and have responsibilities."*

**4 Lack of Dedicated Funding**

Agency staff and Parent Partners point to the need for more funding dedicated to parent leadership and family engagement. The lack of long-term funding underlies most of the challenges identified with the Parent Leadership Pathway, as agencies are cobbling together funds from various grants to compensate Parent Partners and to cover intensive staff time spent on supporting Parent Partners.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"I think with the grant in general, people are definitely supplementing in huge part with other pots of money... We've said this to the state many times — this work cannot be done well without other resources. Just about everybody is bringing in other money, whether it's to support the coordinator or other pieces of the objectives. Everybody is supplementing. You couldn't do it any other way."*



**BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:**

*"Just the time that it takes for outreach and recruitment to bring people into that role, because of the number of hours, or not having enough funding to support and sustain. There's a lot of challenges in the model."*

**PARENT PARTNER:**

*"For all of these pieces to work, you must have a strong and solid base, a foundation, to have a group that can work well together. I think the challenge comes from lack of funding. In our neighborhood we do have people interested and willing to do the work, but they cannot volunteer a lot of their hours, because we all have other jobs. All the people that are connected to us need to bring some income to our homes... We live in a pretty expensive area and that it is a challenge."*

**Will the Parent Leadership Pathway Be Sustained?**

During the first three years, the BCT initiative was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This direct funding ended in January 2014. Because a strong collaboration already existed between the Boston Family Engagement Network and Thrive in 5, the Parent Partner model remains in place because all of the neighborhoods saw the value of the model and work that was done by Parent Partners.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"This model is so important. When this money goes away, or there is a new 'flavor of the month,' these families still live in these communities. Money goes away and this network that we're building dies. If we have parents in the community who are identified within the community as resources, and they share with other families, then the work we were trying to do will continue and not simply end because the money's gone."*



*Thrive in 5's Parent Leadership Pathway develops lifelong parent leaders who continue to stay involved in their children's education once they enter school, allowing for elements of BCT's family engagement work to transition into the K-12 sector.*

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"We've given them enough support that they would be fine, would continue to lead. When they get into grade school with kids, joining the councils, PTO [parent teacher organization] — every single Parent Partner is involved in their kids' school. And that was the first thing we tried to teach them, that you are your child's first teacher. If we had to get the message across to them, how are we expecting them to get the message out there?"*

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**PARENT PARTNER:**

*"I honestly use my Parent Partner skills with the families in the school where I work. Once I say I am a mom and I understand you, they open their hearts. And it's a little different from someone who is sitting behind a desk and still helping them, but not offering some kind of connection. They really open up their hearts and I can help them more!"*



However, as noted throughout this toolkit, funding continues to be the key challenge underlying all of the other barriers to implementing this impactful family engagement work. All of the neighborhoods across Boston are preserving as much as possible of the BCT family engagement model, including the Parent Partner model. The city lacks a central organization that is spearheading, leading, and providing a steady stream of funding for this work. Most organizations are piecing together budgets from year to year, and no one source is providing enough funding to sustain the Parent Partners and parent leadership efforts.

**AGENCY STAFF:**

*"To make it sustainable, it needs to be funded; without the funding, those positions go away. That's one thing we can all agree on. Also, we could have 10 Parent Partners and there would still be work to do. We're trying to figure out what we're doing that is going well versus what we could be doing more of. Funding is a big part of it."*

One of the biggest successes of the parent leadership strategy through BCT was the institutionalization of the Parent Leadership model, now through the Boston Family Engagement Network.

**BOSTON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK COORDINATOR:**

*"I think it's important to engage parents at the leadership level and decision making level, if you really want to shift from just providing services to really making sure that you're on the pulse of the community, doing things that are relevant and doing what families really need. I don't think you get enough just from doing surveys. You really have to have parents at the table helping to plan this work. So I'm hopeful that the Parent Partner will continue to be a valued role. I don't know if it will continue to look the same over time, but it's important that we continue grappling with it, figuring out what works best with the resources that we have."*



Thrive in 5's ambitious agenda laid a solid foundation, and made a mark on the city of Boston. From the individual families whose lives have changed permanently, to the systemic change that agencies and communities have undergone, these effects will be seen for a long time to come as Boston's young children enter school and grow.

There is a need for sustainable funding streams and public/private structures to support large-scale early childhood agendas. **Evaluation reports** prepared by the University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Social Policy provide detailed information about the many successes achieved by this ambitious initiative, and recommendations for moving forward.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Information for this report was gathered from interviews conducted in spring 2016. Twenty Parent Partners and 18 agency staff persons were interviewed regarding their parent leadership efforts conducted in partnership with Thrive in 5 and the Boston Family Engagement Network.

In addition, data was referenced from the BCT annual reports, prepared by a cross disciplinary team at University of Massachusetts Boston's Center for Social Policy.

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## Agency Partners

- + Family Nurturing Center in Allston Brighton (BCT, BFEN and STS)
- + John F. Kennedy Family Service Center in Charlestown (BFEN and STS)
- + Boys and Girls Club of Dorchester in Dorchester (BFEN and STS)
- + DotHouse Health in Dorchester (BCT and STS)
- + Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Dudley Village (BCT and STS)
- + East Boston Social Centers in East Boston (BCT, BFEN and STS)
- + Nurtury in Jamaica Plain (BFEN and STS)
- + ABCD Mattapan Head Start in Mattapan (BFEN and STS)
- + ABCD South Side Head Start in Roslindale (BFEN and STS)
- + Jamaica Plain Coalition: Tree of Life (BFEN and STS)
- + South Boston Neighborhood House in South Boston (BCT, BFEN and STS)
- + United South End Settlements in South End (BCT, BFEN and STS)