

Focus Group Report

Parents Are Already Leading. The System
Hasn't Caught Up.



Executive Summaries

In January 2026, Mass ParentCorps conducted six focus groups with 27 highly engaged parent leaders from across Massachusetts. Participants represented diverse communities and were connected to five community-based organizations: Families First, East Boston Social Center, Union Capital, Vital Village Networks, and Family Nurturing Center of Massachusetts. Four groups were held in English and two in Spanish to ensure accessibility and full participation.

The discussions explored how parents experience leadership today and helped inform the design of Mass ParentCorps — a new statewide initiative that centers parents as leaders, partners, and experts in shaping early childhood systems and family engagement strategies. Parents emphasized the importance of culturally responsive outreach, language access, fair compensation, and genuine shared decision-making power. Their insights will directly shape the initiative's values, structure, and implementation. Collectively, parents expressed a strong desire to move beyond advisory roles toward meaningful partnership and influence. These findings reinforce the importance of building a model that reflects parents' lived experience and leadership.

“One word that describes what a parent leader means to me is empowering. When I became a mother, this work became very, very important to me. Just being part of this community that serves parents and families — I’m there.”
— Focus Group Participant

Key Findings

1. Parents See Leadership as Advocacy and Community Change

Participants consistently described parent leaders as advocates, connectors, and trusted voices for families. Leadership was framed not as a title, but as a responsibility, using lived experience to influence systems, support other parents, and improve outcomes for children.

2. Parents Are Building Workforce-Ready Skills

Through advisory roles, facilitation, outreach, and advocacy, parents reported developing high-level competencies, including public speaking, storytelling, systems navigation, leadership development, and community organizing. Many described significant growth in confidence and professional capacity. While individual backgrounds and objectives vary widely, many of the foundational skills are common and subject to shared training

“ I don’t like public speaking; I feel like everybody’s watching me. But practicing in front of my team helped me build my skills and confidence.

— Focus Group Participant

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3. The System Lacks Clear Pathways and Sustainability

Despite skill development, parents identified structural barriers that limit long-term engagement and economic mobility:

- No clear leadership-to-career pathway
- Limited compensation or volunteer-based roles
- Lack of formal credentials or recognized certification
- Language barriers and limited accessibility
- Burnout and time constraints

Parents emphasized that leadership opportunities often end without transitioning into paid or permanent positions.

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“Right now, we kind of play it by ear. I took one class, then another, but there wasn’t a real pathway to follow.”

— Focus Group Participant

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4. Strong Demand for Career Pathways & Workforce Development

Parents expressed clear interest in structured career development pathways that connect leadership experience to paid employment. There was strong demand for:

- Recognized credentials aligned with workforce needs
- Paid leadership roles and permanent positions
- Clear progression from training to employment
- Professional recognition of lived experience

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“We go from training to training, role to role, but not to being hired. After a couple of years, there should be a position. Something permanent.”

— Focus Group Participant

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5 Academic Achievement & Higher Educational Opportunities

In addition to workforce pathways, parents expressed a strong interest in furthering their education through:

- College credit for parent leadership experience
- Stackable certificates that count toward degree programs
- Support navigating higher education systems
- Opportunities to complete or advance college studies
- Validation or recognition of prior and international degrees

Parents view higher education advancement as critical to long-term economic mobility and professional growth.

6. Equity and Multilingual Access Are Essential

Participants stressed the importance of flexible scheduling, stipends, childcare support, multilingual access, and affordable English language classes to ensure broad and equitable participation across Massachusetts communities.

The Opportunity

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“Certificates would recognize the time and effort I put into developing my skills, and show the value of parent leadership.”

— Focus Group Participant

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The focus groups confirmed a significant opportunity: parents are already developing valuable leadership skills, but Massachusetts lacks a structured, compensated, and credentialed pathway to sustain and professionalize that leadership.

Mass ParentCorps has the potential to help the field build a statewide parent leadership pipeline that:

- Recognizes lived experience as expertise
- Provides credentials from recognized higher ed organizations.
- Supports a wide variety of workforce opportunities
- Connects leadership development to economic mobility
- Strengthens community support systems in a time of acute needs

By transforming parent leadership into a sustainable and recognized workforce pathway, the resulting network can strengthen families, deepen community engagement, and advance equity across the Commonwealth.

Furthermore, as the role of parent leader becomes more professionalized and recognized, it will become easier to attract both new parents *and* new funding into the field.

“Imagine if it’s statewide, bringing people together, sharing experiences and culture. That’s very powerful. That’s really exciting.”

Note: Focus groups were facilitated by the Mass ParentCorps team to inform initiative design. Findings are qualitative in nature and are not part of a formal external evaluation.