

Parent Leadership Training Institute: A Decade Of Empowering Families

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In 2007, a well-crafted title on the cover of an education publication captured the interest and opened the minds of school and community leaders alike. The title, *Beyond the Bake Sale*, signaled a new understanding of the critical role that families play in changing outcome for children and school systems. But in Alexandria City Public Schools that message had been delivered much earlier. In a replication of an award winning program initiated by the Connecticut Department of Health Commission on Children, Alexandria community and family leaders had already created the Parent Leadership Training Institute. In fact, *Beyond the Bake Sale* referenced early work on parent engagement in Alexandria!

This year, PLTI celebrates its tenth anniversary, with a class of 22 members and over 150 alumni who advocate for Alexandria's children. The PLTI program demands a serious commitment. Members attend class each Friday night for 20 weeks and interact around topics such as '*how local systems work*' and 'defining a problem and working toward a solution'. In a series of online video stories, PLTI alumnus, Bill Campbell – who is now serving his second term as a member of the Alexandria School Board - credits PLTI for helping him, and many parents, understand the power learned by advocating for your own child and turning it into advocacy for all children in a system. System advocacy is an important part of the PLTI program and prepares parents to addresses the policy aspects of schools and schooling. Families learn how systems work and how to have their voice heard in ways that support action. PLTI alumnus, Yasmin Hassoun, class of 2014, explains, "PLTI gave me the knowledge, the tools...the power! PLTI has changed my life and the lives of my children." 2015 Alumnus, Claudine Sangare (Class of 2015 and now serving on the PLTI Board of Directors) says, "PLTI helped me take my natural leadership qualities and move them to a different arena".

Through PLTI, each family member applies their new learning to a project of their choosing and is matched to a school or community mentor. The PLTI website shares stories of projects that have benefitted families and the entire community including: the distribution of thermometers and magnets to help detect early illness and prevent the spread in schools; discussion groups for families on practices to reduce teen pregnancy; and *Smart Money* classes at both the high school and middle school levels. Like many urban areas, ACPS serves students from a wide array of cultures. For a decade, PLTI has harnessed the power of family to bridge differences and bring people together in the common goal of achieving better outcomes for their children and the system that serves them. When the 10th anniversary class graduates in May, they will already have made an impact far '*beyond the bake sale*'. They will be leaders and

learners, ambassadors and change agents who have a lifelong commitment to children. As the PLTI goals proclaim, they will 'be the leaders they want to be'. PLTI will mark its 10th anniversary with a celebration and fundraiser at Metro Stage in Alexandria on April 29, 2016.

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