



Parent & Caregiver Leadership Initiative

New Bedford, MA | Merck Family Fund

Three-Year Initiative

Overview

The Merck Family Fund awarded ELECT SouthCoast a three-year grant to launch a parent and caregiver leadership initiative that strengthens school-based governance, expands inclusive pathways to civic leadership, and connects family engagement to broader systems change. By training and supporting parent leaders, revitalizing PTOs and School Councils, and building long-term pipelines to public service, the initiative will diversify local leadership and improve outcomes for families and communities.

Context & Need

New Bedford is actively exploring strategies to improve educational outcomes, strengthen neighborhoods, and increase civic participation. Yet parent engagement across New Bedford Public Schools remains uneven and limited, with just a few active PTOs across 18 elementary schools.

At the same time, New Bedford's civic leadership does not reflect the diversity of its families or student population. The School Committee has just two women among seven members, and only one member is a current parent of New Bedford Public School students. According to data compiled by ELECT SouthCoast, the city would need to triple the number of women in elected office to achieve gender parity.

MassINC's 2019 research highlights School Councils as a key entry point to civic leadership. These bodies not only strengthen inclusive school governance, but also provide parents with early experience in elections, decision-making, and shared accountability. Strengthening these structures is essential to building civic muscle among parents and shifting who participates in—and ultimately leads—local systems.

Leadership & Capacity

ELECT SouthCoast brings a proven track record of developing women and parent leaders for public service. In 2025 alone, the organization engaged 170 participants and supported nine women who successfully ran for local office.

The initiative is led by New Bedford parents with deep experience in school governance, systems change, and community leadership, and is supported by strong partnerships with: New Bedford Public Schools, City of New Bedford Office of Housing and Community Development, the United Way of Greater New Bedford, and MassINC.

Impact

ELECT SouthCoast's Parent & Caregiver Leadership Initiative is designed to fill this gap by aligning parent leadership development with school-centered neighborhood change. In the short term, success looks like **more parents and caregivers engaging as leaders** at their children's schools, gaining skills and implementing projects to improve their school communities and neighborhoods. In the longer term, we expect that this will **strengthen leadership infrastructure in schools** so that parent leadership is sustained. Finally, we expect that this initiative **grows the pipeline of civic leaders** who reflect the city's diversity serving on nonprofit boards, public commissions, and elected office.



www.electsouthcoast.org
electsouthcoast@gmail.com

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