

Parent Leadership Training for Rural Communities

Recommended Curriculum Adaptations for Rural Programs

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Client Logo

For more than 20 years, the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) curriculum and training model has empowered family leaders and equipped them with the civic tools and skills they need to affect positive and lasting change on behalf of children, youth, families, and community. PLTI is an increasingly recognized national model that creates authentic civic leadership development and civic engagement opportunities.

Fidelity to the curriculum and program protocol are at the core of PLTI's recognized and proven success. During its history, the curriculum has remained constant, except for minor adjustments due to time constraints, extended group conversations, and necessary changes in the 'facilitation moment'. Over time, questions about modifying the existing curriculum model to better meet the needs of target populations have surfaced. One such audience is the rural community.

In order to increase program relevancy in rural communities, this report recommends that rural program teams are given autonomy to make local decisions about how to best administer and deliver the curriculum. Adhering to program fidelity and protocol is critically important, and in no way is this report suggesting otherwise. It is suggested that perhaps rural teams are trained even more extensively on the program's philosophy. At that time, teams could be presented with numerous frameworks that maximize adherence to program fidelity and provide the flexibility needed to make local adjustments.

This report also examines how the Parent Leadership Training Institute program offered in rural communities could be modified to consider the consistent themes that emerged during data collection: 1) rural citizens' well-established relationships in community, 2) acknowledgement that rural citizens are already extensively involved in civic leadership activities, 3) limitations of programming in rural communities, and 4) recommendations to shorten the existing curriculum.

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The Need for Rural Curriculum Adaptations

Being a committed family and civic leader can be challenging with the many competing activities, priorities, and responsibilities in our lives. Rural lifestyles can make effective civic engagement even more challenging. As such, it is important for the Parent Leadership Training Institute to embrace the differences between rural and urban family and civic leadership. By acknowledging these differences, PLTI will be able to adapt existing curriculum to more easily blend into rural culture and lifestyles, allowing for more successful leadership training programs.

The level of civic engagement in a community can be determined by several indicators:

- Locally owned and oriented businesses.
- Residential stability/longevity (time lived in the same house).
- Homeownership rates.
- Population in migration – people move to a community instead of away from it.
- Number of congregations, civic associations, family farms, and other groups (PTAs, Girl Scouts, athletic clubs, social clubs, bible study groups, etc.).
- Balance in the ages of elected officials – Older officials may bring more experience but may also be more conservative and less willing to try new things (less risk taking and reform implementation) versus younger officials who are more energetic, innovative, and willing to take risks.
- Positive development of social determinants of health beyond economic development – affordable housing, quality schools, accessible health care, developed infrastructure, etc.

Rural communities may have higher incidences of many of these indicators, and are poised to have more civically engaged citizens compared to their urban counterparts. However, civic leadership often happens informally in rural cultures, and is not necessarily recognized as such.

The United States Census does not explicitly define 'rural' (US Census 2000); only 'urban' areas are defined. Whatever falls outside the definitions of 'urban' is considered 'rural'. The US Census defines two types of 'urban' areas:

- Urbanized Areas - 50,000 or more people
- Urban Clusters –populations at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people

Rural areas are sparsely populated and cover large geographic areas, and this makeup favors many of the indicators mentioned previously. Rural lifestyles can potentially lead to cohesive and tight networks of natural leaders: everyone knows everyone and networks communicate regularly through many channels (community activities, social groups, local sports events, church gatherings, telephone, and social media). As a result, rural citizens collectively move agendas forward and solve problems almost by default through their consistent contact with one another.

For more on Rural Civic Engagement Indicators, see the brief found in [Appendix A](#).

Recommendations Summary

The primary purpose of this report is to look at options for making the PLTI curriculum easily fit into rural participants' lifestyles. A number of recommendations may also be relevant regardless of rural or urban program delivery.

To inform this report, input was sought from PLTI/FLTI site coordinators, facilitators, and alumni in Colorado and Wyoming. Rural challenges that all these groups recognized are also presented. Findings and recommendations are broadly categorized into three main topics: 1) program structure as it relates to a 'people focused' perspective, 2) curriculum reconfigurations – a 'program-delivery' perspective, and 3) rural site considerations - a 'rural characteristics' perspective.

This report also informs PLTI of rural-focused, anecdotal comments recorded from conversations. Although not researched, these comments are presented as they are common perceptions that are not necessarily true. Addressing these rural civic leadership comments through adjusted and refined curriculum language, program activities, and other curriculum content could go a long way to cross the intersection between rural and urban.

Curriculum recommendations are meant to make the program: 1) easier for rural participants to attend while giving them the civic tools needed to grow as family leaders, and 2) value their rich and existing history of civic involvement. The recommendations also address several of the rural misconceptions mentioned.

PLTI is a national leader in family and civic leadership, and understands the importance of developing effective family leaders. With that in mind, this report offers PLTI recommendations for streamlining the curriculum for rural participants, while maintaining program fidelity.

Methodology Summary

Recommendations were compiled from the following data and feedback mechanisms:

- **Curriculum assessment from PLTI and FLTI site coordinators from Colorado and Wyoming.**

Five Colorado site coordinators (Eagle, Larimer, Mesa, Montelores, and Prowers) and two Wyoming site coordinators (Casper and Thermopolis) were given the opportunity to convene their facilitator teams, assess curriculum sessions from a rural site perspective, and provide insights and recommendations for rural curriculum adaptations.

Full curriculum assessments can be found in a separate document, [Appendix E](#).

- **Program feedback survey sent to PLTI and FLTI alumni in Colorado and Wyoming.**

A survey was sent to alumni of rural programs in Colorado and Wyoming. Twenty-six (26) alumni responses were received - 15 from Colorado and 11 from Wyoming. The majority of alumni who responded participated in programs during the years 2013-2015, but participation extended back to 2008.

Full alumni comments can be found in [Appendix C](#).

- **Collection of thoughts, feedback, ideas from National, State, and Community program leadership.**

During the information gathering and research phases of this report, program leadership had numerous opportunities to provide information, thoughts, and ideas during trainings, meetings, conference calls, and one-on-one conversations. Program leadership has consistently been encouraged by the opportunity to give input and guidance for rural curriculum adaptations. While the majority of leadership did not formally assess individual curriculum sessions, their feedback was captured and has been included.

Findings Relevant to All Audiences - Program Structure

1. Keep the same facilitators for the duration of the program.
2. Fewer and shorter sessions.
3. Seasonal program coordination.
4. Follow the university semester schedule.
5. New uses of technology.
6. Extensive participant screening.
7. Taste-of-PLTI events throughout the year to recruit participants.
8. Community projects are team projects.
9. More technical assistance for community projects.
10. Minimum of 8-10 participants.

Summary of Findings

Suggestions and feedback from site coordinators and alumni, along with the collection of thoughts from program leadership covered a broad range of topics. Some offered very specific information to support their suggestion. Findings were categorized into 3 main topics: 1) Program Structure – A ‘People-Focused’ Perspective, 2) Curriculum Reconfigurations –A ‘Program Delivery’ Perspective and 3) Rural Site Considerations – A ‘Rural Characteristics’ Perspective. See [Appendix B](#) and [Appendix C](#) for alumni comments and [Appendix E](#) for site coordinator comments.

Program Structure – A ‘People-Focused’ Perspective

- Keep the same facilitation team across the retreat and the 20 sessions.
- Consider the length of the program and the length of each session.
- Time the program according to the season and month.
- Follow a university semester schedule (approximately 14-16 weeks) and use semester start dates, especially if participants are students or seeking Continuing Education Units (CEUs) or higher education credits.
- Incorporate more technology options into sessions and activities.
- Prescreen participants even more extensively for buy-in and for program fit since commitment to attendance is at the core of program success.
- Coordinate community forums as structured leadership development sessions throughout the year to raise awareness about the program, recruit participants, and bring awareness to civic leadership.
- Coordinate community projects as team projects to increase relationship and networking within existing community endeavors.
- Provide more technical assistance, work time, and mentoring during community project development. Provide intentional connections to alumni and community groups.
- Run a program with no less than 8-10 to maximize leadership development within the participants.

Curriculum Reconfigurations – A ‘Program Delivery’ Perspective

- Combine or remove activities that are redundant for a rural community.
- Consider combining sessions 4 and 5 and also 6 and 7 in Phase I. In Phase II, consider combining 13 and 14 and also 15 and 17.
- Look at reconfiguring activities that involve elected officials as strong relationships already exist.
- Ensure that local issues are discussed in activities like farm/rural land use, water rights, etc.
- Focus on letters to the editor and local newspaper reporting as rural media may be more established, noticed, and utilized in a rural community.
- Offer Continuing Education Units (CEUs) and certificates acknowledging professional requirements are met.
- Ensure that conversations and activities covering difficult conversations, such as racism, are candid and do not avoid the topic. Excessive emphasis on political correctness may limit meaningful discussions.
- Identify opportunities to include more diversity (i.e. tribal perspectives and migrant worker policies).
- Look to experienced community leaders with related expertise to be guest speakers and for community project mentoring.

Rural Site Considerations – A ‘Rural Characteristics’ Perspective

- Distances traveled and weather conditions.
- Limited funding sources.
- Shortage of participants for annual program.
- Lack of diversity.
- Limited family meal options.
- Mindset and ideology – more conservative, established residents versus outsiders moving in with more progressive, risk-taking attitudes.
- High levels of community spirit and cohesiveness.
- Easy access to community leaders and decision makers.
- More emphasis placed on understanding local community leadership roles over State and Federal roles.
- Both urban and rural communities face similar barriers and challenges – how to be an effective advocate for existing services and community needs when there are funding/budget issues.

Findings Relevant to All Audiences - Curriculum Reconfigurations

1. Redundant activities may exist.
2. Combine sessions 4 and 5, 6 and 7, 13 and 14, and 15 and 17.
3. Revision of activities involving elected officials.
4. Local issues discussions are important.
5. Write letters to the editor.
6. CEUs and professional certificates.
7. Create candid conversations about race.
8. More diversity.
9. Community project mentoring by local experts.
10. Untapped expertise and talents of participants.