Gaining knowledge, developing leadership skills and building connections are just a few of the benefits for parents who participate in the Fred Saigh Parent Leadership Institute (PLI).

Each year since 2006, the PLI has provided training to parents of children with disabilities on topics designed to help them with their child’s educational journey. Training ranges from how to be part of a productive meeting to how to positively interact and collaborate with other parents and school officials.

“Most of us have a disability of some sort – whether it be the need to wear glasses or a hearing aid or the inability to move or communicate independently,” said Stacy Zobrist, a parent of a kindergartner who receives SSD services in the Lindbergh School District. She attended the PLI last year with her husband. “We are all more alike than we are different, and we all deserve a chance to shine.”

During the program, parents are also exposed to a broad array of new resources and gain access to a strong network of other parents, school officials and community leaders. Participants attend three full days of training, held on Saturdays once a month for three months. SSD’s Parent Education and Diversity Awareness Program presents the PLI with funding from the Special Education Foundation.

Zobrist said she learned from speaker Kathie Snow that a disability is just a body part that works differently.

“Young Derrick Dufresne’s advice on what to do now that will help your child most when they become an adult was great. And I really appreciated Nancy Martin’s sharing of what it is like to grow up with a disability,” said Zobrist.

She added that they gained valuable input from numerous parents who have traveled the same path. “There is a bond between families who have a member with a disability, and it’s so helpful for us to have an opportunity to get together and share our joys and challenges,” she said.

The PLI is now accepting applications for its next program to be held in three sessions on Sept. 6, Oct. 4 and Nov. 1.

There is no cost to participate and the program will run from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at SSD’s Central Office at 12110 Clayton Road, Town & Country, MO 63131.

Applications are due by April 17. At least one parent from each school district in St. Louis County and each SSD school will be chosen to participate. All parents are encouraged to apply. Parents of children receiving First Steps and early childhood special education services and those with children in kindergarten through third grade are especially encouraged to apply.

Fred Saigh Parent Leadership Institute
Apply by April 17

Download the application at http://bit.ly/parentleadership or contact Joann Noll at 314.989.8108 or jnoll@ssdmo.org.
Student Austin Combs has made great strides physically and mentally after undergoing serious brain surgery earlier this fall.

“Austin is slowly getting back to his pre-surgery personality,” said Shannon Combs, Austin’s mother. “He has been progressing very well, and every day we see improvements.”

Austin received homebound services from SSD for five weeks directly following his surgery.

SSD provides instruction in a home, hospital or other setting for students whose needs cannot be appropriately met in the school setting, due to medical or other reasons.

After surgery, Austin worked with SSD homebound services teacher Ben Mehringer. They met several times a week at a library near Austin’s home.

“We work to care for the whole student and develop not only core academics, but also social skills, personal confidence and self-esteem,” said Mehringer.

According to Mehringer, Austin’s social development continued to grow through his interpersonal interactions at the library. “He’s been working on smiling, gently touching, remembering attributes of people, developing his sense of humor and connecting through common interests like the St. Louis Cardinals playoff games.”

Austin and his teacher worked on core academics while mixing in experiential learning. “One example of experiential and interdisciplinary learning is when we purposely interacted socially with people around us, like the workers and patrons at the library,” said Mehringer.

They also mixed learning by observing and discussing the environment. “Austin would collect and study a variety of autumn leaves in the neighborhood,” said Mehringer. “He would bring back a pocketful of leaves from our short walk and identify the originating trees in our nature books.”

And by observing different birds’ communication patterns, Austin was able to see how that communication differs from humans. Mehringer said Austin’s self-confidence increased and he was encouraging others to share their own talents and gifts.

Austin returned to his school — Selvidge Middle in the Rockwood School District — full time in November and his teachers and parents are seeing improvements each day.

“He is receiving physical therapy and occupational therapy services to gain back some old skills and increase his strength,” said Shannon Combs. “Each day it gets better and better. Austin really benefited from homebound services post surgery. He has special needs, but to us he is EXTRA special!”

Mehringer agrees. “We need more people like Austin in this world to remind us of the true meaning of life,” he said.
SSD teacher Michelle Shockley teaches in a classroom of seven students that receive SSD services at Claymont Elementary in the Parkway School District. But her pathway to teaching involved many stepping-stones along the way.

“I was an SSD paraprofessional for five years,” she said. “And I was also a substitute teacher in the District before that. It all really helped me know what I was getting into before becoming a teacher.”

But Shockley’s path wasn’t initially set toward teaching. Her interest first developed during her practicum while studying human services at St. Louis Community College-Meramec.

It was at that point that she realized working in the classroom might be the right fit for her. Building on her experience as a paraprofessional and a substitute teacher, she began taking evening classes at Missouri Baptist University, working toward a degree in both elementary and special education.

“It was great to be able to take classes while working as a paraprofessional,” Shockley said. “There is a lot of flexibility being a para. That is one of the major benefits to it.”

“But the best thing about being a para is building that one-on-one relationship with students,” she said. “I just loved the relationship I got to build with them. And it really did make my job easier once I got to know the child. As a teacher now, I don’t get as much one-on-one time — and I miss that.”

Shockley said that her experience as a paraprofessional also helped her understand the time and skills involved in being a teacher, as well as how to work with parents and build relationships throughout school buildings.

Shockley now works with several paraprofessionals in her classroom. One of them, Laura Fornwalt, echoes many of the same positive comments about the paraprofessional position.

“If you’re thinking about going into education, you definitely need to get your foot in here and get a taste of it,” said Fornwalt, who also served as a substitute teacher. “Not one day is going to be the same.”

But no matter what positions Shockley or Fornwalt have held in the District, the focus on student success is paramount.

“There’s nothing better than seeing students make progress,” Shockley said. “I don’t know how to describe just how fulfilling that is.”

SSD is always looking for dedicated individuals who believe in the District’s mission that all students can succeed.

Paraprofessionals, substitutes and other support staff positions require 60 college credit hours.

**Event Offers Families One-Stop Access to Autism Resources**

SSD’s Parent Education and Diversity Awareness Program will sponsor the North County Autism-Asperger-PDD Resource Fair in April — also Autism Awareness Month — to help parents and community members learn more about autism.

The event is scheduled for **3:30–6 p.m. April 23 at SSD’s Ackerman School, 1550 Derhake Road in Florissant.** It will feature information about programs and resources from SSD and other community agencies, including the Department of Mental Health St. Louis Regional Office, Missouri Families for Effective Autism Treatment (MOFEAT), Missouri Parents Act (MPACT), the Recreation Council of Greater St. Louis and St. Louis ARC.

Participants will have the chance to learn more about topics such as respite care, recreation opportunities, community summer programs, behavior support and planning for the future.

The event is free and open to the public. Registration is not required to attend. For more information, call 314.989.8194 (711 Deaf/HOH).